

NEW SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

BRITISH FANTASY AWARD WINNER: BEST MAGAZINE



NEW STORY & INTERVIEW NEIL WILLIAMSON **OTHER STORIES BY** CLAIRE HUMPHREY
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ANSIBLE LINK • MUTANT POPCORN • LASER FODDER • BOOK ZONE • READERS' POLL RESULTS



PRINTED IN THE UK

252

COVER ART BY WAYNE HAAG • MAY-JUN 2014 • £4.99

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POLLS AND AWARDS: INCLUSIVITY AND THE TRAP OF SILENCE

The late comedian Linda Smith was a deft exponent of the metaphorical boot to the groin of political hypocrites and talentless scandal magnets. On one panel show, a fellow guest suggested she temper her scorn as it might give her subject "the oxygen of publicity". Her response: "I'm not that happy with him having the oxygen of oxygen, actually."

Criticising those whose views you find abhorrent is always a stroll through a minefield. But, to misquote someone much smarter than ourselves, silence can make you guilty of complicity.

We're delighted readers, writers and critics think enough of *Interzone* to include us, once again, on the Hugo Award shortlist (for Best Semiprozine) but perplexed at finding ourselves on a page of nominees with Theodore Beale, the writer also known as Vox Day. Since the nomination of Day's 'Opera Vita Aeterna' for the Best Novelette category, much has been written about the rights and wrongs of allowing an author's politics to adulterate one's assessment of the value of their work.

We share the view that publishing should be genuinely inclusive, and we fully respect the view that inclusivity must be based on an acceptance of views in opposition to one's own. It is not however always possible to apply the maxim that writers should be assessed independently of their politics. In the case of Vox Day we are not talking about differences in opinion on rates of taxation, unemployment benefit, NHS funding or the role of austerity in eradicating a fiscal deficit: the hostile reaction to the inclusion of Day is triggered in part by his hate-fuelled rants against people purely on the basis of their identity.

Day has been openly hostile to minorities in the US, comparing Mexican immigration to the Nazi occupation of Europe in WW2. He has said many rape victims are "stupid" and have colluded in being attacked. He considers women's rights to be "a disease that should be eradicated". He has suggested African-American writer and critic N.K. Jemisin is "not equally" homo sapiens sapiens, and has described people "like her" as "half-savages". All this from a writer who asserts "politics don't belong in science fiction" and assumes there are shared, apolitical, "common sense" values (his values) that simply cannot be up for debate.

Vox Day and Larry Correia have acknowledged using their blogs to encourage tactical voting: in fact they are openly celebrating their success in engineering the inclusion of more right-leaning writers on the Hugo lists. Smart thinking and effective tactics, but hardly in the spirit of the Hugos? If we do belong to a literary and artistic community, shouldn't the whole point of the awards be to celebrate the ability of writers, artists and editors to bring us new insights into the human condition and its possibilities?

We'd like to congratulate all Hugo nominees, and wish the best of luck to all those who share a sense of common humanity with all their fellow writers, readers and editors.

On an unreservedly positive note, we'd like to congratulate Nina Allan on winning a well-deserved BSFA Best Short Fiction award for *Spin* (TTA Press). It's a magnificent piece of work. Why not buy a copy and find out exactly why?

We're also cock-a-hoop to report an increase in voting in this year's Readers' Poll. Sadly there were a number of disqualified votes, owing to suspicious voting patterns, but this has not affected the outcome. So we'd like to congratulate joint winners Sean McMullen (for 'Technarion') and Jess Hyslop (for 'Triolet').

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TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane,
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Worldwide Distribution

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Central: centralbooks.com
WWMD: specialistmags.co.uk

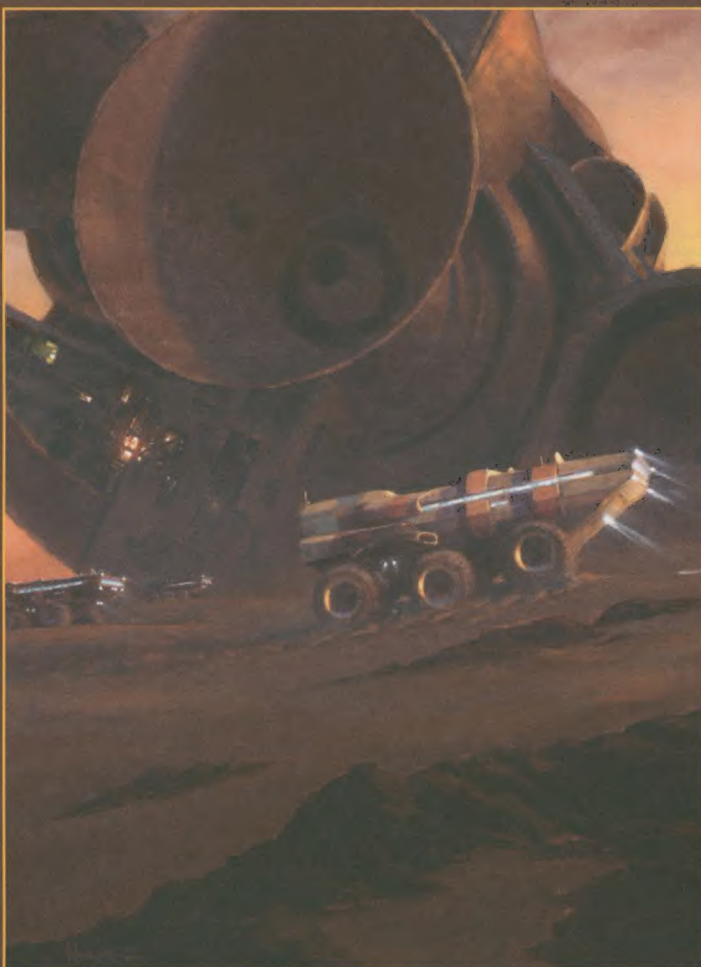
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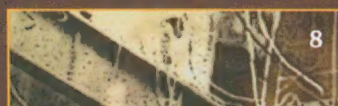
NEIL WILLIAMSON

interviewed by Andy Hedgecock

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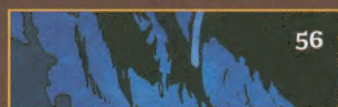
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DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

As Others See Us. 'The Hugo award is a vaguely dildo-shaped silver rocketship...' (*New Statesman*)

Hugos. As usual the nominations have several surprises, such as the appearance thanks to a rules quirk of a long-running fantasy series – 14 fat volumes, 4.3 million words – as a Best Novel nominee. Spot the elephant in the room: *Ancillary Justice* by Ann Leckie; *Neptune's Brood* by Charles Stross; *Parasite* by Mira Grant; *Warbound* by Larry Correia; *The Wheel of Time* by Robert Jordan & Brandon Sanderson. *Interzone* is shortlisted under Semiprozine. For the full list and 1938 Retro Hugos, see www.loncon3.org/hugo_awards.php. For assorted controversy links, see tinyurl.com/mfwtpjk.

Ari Handel, one of the *Noah* screenwriters, responded to complaints about the film's all-white cast by explaining how diversity leads to uncoolness: 'Either you end up with a Bennetton ad or the crew of the Starship Enterprise.' (*Independent*)

More Awards. Arthur C. Clarke: Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice* • BSFA: Novel (tie): Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice* and Gareth L. Powell, *Ack-Ack Macaque*. Short: Nina Allan, *Spin*. Artwork: Joey Hi-fi, *Dream London* cover. Non-fiction: Jeff VanderMeer, *Wonderbook*. • Compton Crook (first novel): Charles Gannon, *Fire With Fire*. • Ken Kesey Award: Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Unreal and The Real*. • PEN/Faulkner Award: Karen Joy Fowler, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*. • Philip K. Dick: Ben H. Winters, *Countdown City*. • Pilgrim Award for sf studies: Joan Gordon. • World Horror Grand Master: Brian Keene.

Peter Jackson's altered subtitle for the third *Hobbit* movie was not, as I'd expected, *The Battle of the Three Armies* with a fourth film added to do proper justice to *The Battle of the Other Two Armies*.

George R.R. Martin's death grip on the Zeitgeist becomes ever tighter: 'Need a baby name? Try *Game of Thrones*! 146 Khaleesis were born in the UK in 2012. Strangely there are no recorded instances of a Joffrey.' (*Independent*) Why it's OK to like the series: '*Game of Thrones* is more *Dynasty* than *Lord of the Rings*, more *House of Cards* than *Xena: Warrior Princess*. It may have pretensions to the fantasy genre but in reality it is pure soap opera, sex and gore, and family politics dressed up in corsets and fabulous costumes.' (*Telegraph*)

The Weakest Link. Host: 'Buzz Lightyear was on the Apollo 11 space mission. True or false?' Contestant: 'True.' (BBC1 *Perfection*) • Host: 'Who wrote *I, Robot*?' Contestant: 'William Burroughs.' (BBC2 *Revenge of the Egghead*)

Court Circular. Tess Gerritsen, whose 1999 novel *Gravity* has 'a lone female astronaut trapped aboard a space station and struggling to get home', is suing Warner Bros not for copyright infringement (they bought the book rights and then used a supposedly original screenplay) but for not giving her a 'based on' film credit. (Vulture.com) • The forgotten 1970s Scots band Bilbo Baggins is now nameless, thanks to the dread Saul Zaentz Company. The band's court appeal was stopped by an IPO judge unimpressed by rebranding with its erstwhile manager's name: 'Henry Spurway's Bilbo Baggins.'

SZC doesn't *always* get its way, failing 'to stop the London-based marketing firm Ocean Outdoors from offering advertising space on two towers on either side of a motorway despite SZC's claim that this was similar to the title of one of the volumes of the Lord of the Rings trilogy.' (*Independent*) If Elvis Presley ever makes a comeback, he too will be in trouble.

Safe Viewing. After long negotiation and screening-out of vile Western corruption, North Korea has chosen three BBC TV series which its people can be allowed to watch: *Doctor Who*, *Top Gear* and *The Teletubbies*. (*Independent*)

Media Awards. Oscars: many categories though not Best Picture were won by *Gravity*; *Frozen* won for animated feature and original song; *Her* original screenplay. • Razzies: three wins for *After Earth*! Worst actor, Jaden Smith; worst supporting actor, Will Smith; worst screen combo, Jaden and Will Smith. • Empire: overall film and director *Gravity*; British film *The World's End*; sf/fantasy *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*; thriller *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*; horror, *The Conjuring*.

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Similes.* 'He'd yawn like a whale on a plankton hunt and swallow like he was choking down a lump of concrete, but his head got more and more like a pressure cooker no matter what he did.' 'He looked like he'd lost about twenty pounds in stature.' (Jack Harvey [Ian Rankin], *Bleeding Hearts*, 1994) 'He slammed onto the hay floor like thirty anvils dropped out of a ten-story window.' (Richard S.



Meyers, *Cry of the Beast*, 1979) • *The Gap into Thogness*. 'Angus' heart clenched in a grimace which didn't show on his face.' 'Her shoulders hunched into a clench of disgust, which she deflected into a shrug.' 'Nick let out a clenched laugh.' 'Above his open mouth, his eyes blinked like cries.' 'His aura yowled of furies that didn't show on his face.' 'The smears on his lenses refracted his blue gaze into streams of hope and apprehension.' 'His eyes slid off as if they'd lost their grip.' 'The air had grown viscid with mortality.' (all Stephen R. Donaldson, *The Gap into Madness: Chaos and Order*, 1994)

R.I.P.

Stewart H. Benedict (1924–2014), US journalist, author and playwright who edited *Tales of Terror and Suspense* (1963), died on 19 March.

John Clagett (1916–2013), US author of the sf novels *A World Unknown* (1975) and *The Orange R* (1978), died on 5 November 2013 aged 97.

Philippe Ebly (Jacques Gouzou, 1920–2014), French author of many sf shorts and novels that sold over two million copies from 1971 and were translated into several languages, died on 1 March aged 93.

Donald Malcolm (1930–2013), Scots author of short sf in *Nebula*, *New Worlds* and *New Writings in SF* 1957–1976 – plus two 1976 novels for Laser Books, *The Unknown Shore* and *The Iron Rain* – died on 9 November 2013.

Alexander Malec (1929–2014), US author whose sf stories are

collected in *Extrapolasis* (1967), died on 1 January aged 84.

Gabriel García Márquez (1927–2014), hugely popular and distinguished Colombian author who won the Nobel Literature Prize for works of magic realism – most famously the unforgettable *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) – died on 17 April aged 87.

Steve Moore (1949–2014), UK writer who scripted comics for *2000 AD* and *Warrior*, was an editor of *Fortean Times* and *Fortean Studies*, novelised the film *V for Vendetta* (2006) and published the 2011 fantasy *Somnium*, died on 14 March aged 64.

William H. Patterson Jr (1951–2014), author of the biography *Robert A. Heinlein: In Dialogue With His Century* (two volumes, 2010 and May 2014), died on 22 April.

Juan José Plans (1943–2014), prolific Spanish sf/fantasy/horror author who adapted many genre classics for radio, died on 24 February.

Andy Robertson (1955–2014), UK editor, publisher and author, *Interzone's* assistant editor for some 20 years from 1984, and latterly running his own Night Lands project (stories in William Hope Hodgson's dying-earth milieu), died on 17 April aged 58.

Alan Rodgers (1959–2014), US author – mainly of horror but also of some sf – who won a Stoker award for his debut story 'The Boy who Came Back from the Dead' (1987), died on 8 March aged 54.

Peter Ruber (1940–2014), Australian-born editor at Arkham

House 1997–2004, who edited collections by H. Russell Wakefield and Seabury Quinn for Ash-Tree Press, died on 6 March.

Jonathan Schell (1943–2014), bestselling US nonfiction author whose *The Fate of the Earth* (1982) inspired the nuclear-holocaust film *The Day After* (1983), died on 25 March aged 70.

Hilbert Schenck (1926–2013), Hugo- and Nebula-nominated author of several striking sf stories 1953–1993, whose novels include *A Rose for Armageddon* (1982), died on 2 December aged 87.

Michael Shea (1946–2014), US author of much fine dark fantasy and sf/horror – often echoing Vance as in the World Fantasy Award-winning *Niffit the Lean* (1982), or Lovecraft as in *The Color Out of Time* (1984) – died on 16 February; he was 67. His novella 'The Growlimb' (January 2004 *F&SF*) was another WFA winner.

Lucius Shepard (1943–2014), US author of much richly styled sf and fantasy flavoured with magic realism – a note established in his 1984 debut novel *Green Eyes* – died on 18 March aged 70. His many awards include the 1985 Campbell for best new writer, a Nebula for the 1986 'R&R' – incorporated into *Life during Wartime* (1987) – and a Hugo for 'Barnacle Bill the Spacer' (1992). A personal favourite, from the Dragon Griaule fantasy sequence, is *The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter* (1988).

John Rowe Townsend (1922–2014), UK academic and author of young-adult novels – several sf, beginning with *Noah's Castle* (1975) – died on 24 March. He was 91.

READERS' POLL

SEAN McMULLEN AND JESS HYSLOP ARE JOINT WINNERS OF THE 2013 READERS' POLL

There was a dead heat at the top of this year's poll with 'Technarion' by Sean McMullen and 'Triolet' by Jess Hyslop coming out as joint winners. Jason Sanford's 'Paprika' was only one vote behind.

The number of votes cast increased significantly on last year. But, as no award is complete without its controversies, I took the decision to disallow seven ballots as a result of a suspicious voting pattern. While, obviously, it is acceptable for authors to remind their friends that they can vote in the poll, this is a poll for *Interzone* readers to pick their favourite story and not a popularity competition.

As has become the norm, voting was overwhelmingly positive, with positive votes outstripping negative votes by almost thirteen to one. However, for the first time since 2008 one story received a negative aggregate score and two stories split readers right down the middle, scoring the same number of positive and negative votes. This year's most controversial story was 'The Angel at the Heart of the Rain' by Aliette de Bodard – which some of you adored but which attracted negative votes too.

The most popular issue this year, by the very slimmest of margins, was #248, just beating #249 in positive votes. Generally the average scores per issue were higher than in previous years, but #247 was clearly the least popular issue.

I'd like to thank everyone who took the time to vote, especially those who took the time to explain their choices and offer comments. It's always good to hear from you.

Martin McGrath

Stephen Tollyfield

I like the stories you like – but you do have *Black Static*, so I cannot escape the perception that you are straining at the boundaries of what constitutes a story for *Interzone*. However being someone for whom the canonical history of SF is Golden Age, through Ballard and cyberpunk to wherever it is we are now, which has been so admirably challenged by Jonathan McCalmont in his 'Future Interrupted' columns, I have to admit that I might be wrong... In fact #249 is such a good issue that it almost gives the lie to the point made above.

Jens Berke

It's a tough choice to pick the best story because there were at least half a dozen stories that were excellent. Best story: 'Sentry Duty' by Nigel Brown. While reading it I just thought it was very good. It slowly became a favourite afterwards, when the story popped up in my mind every now and then. Apart from being well written I think what makes it most excellent is how it deals with the universal topic of a culture clash and how rituals and traditions force actions and behaviour upon beings – in this case Ssthra, who can't help but obey to her upbringing as soon as she realises that Jo is prey, no matter how good the two were getting along before and no matter how much she would probably have loved to enjoy more of Jo's company.

Barbara Hvidt

Thus ends my first year as a subscriber to *Interzone*. I am very pleased with the magazine as a whole. Special praise for 'Future Interrupted', my favourite content apart from the fiction.

David K. Smith

I think the quality of production since the change to the new format has been fantastic and I would like to thank you for keeping science fiction alive for me. *Interzone* provides a variety of science fiction that meets my idea of how a good magazine should both challenge and satisfy the needs of its audience. Within the list of stories I have liked there are some which tell familiar stories and some that are told in familiar ways, but there are also those that try to do something new or pick up on a modern phenomenon. It is the range of style and ideas which keep the magazine fresh in my mind and it is the design and illustrations that hold these stories within a consistent format that encourages me to explore each issue.

Christopher M. Geeson

My particular favourites this year were Guy Haley's 'iRobot', John Shirley's 'The Kindest Man in Stormland' and 'The Face Tree' by Antony Mann (I've been eagerly reading every Antony Mann story you've published ever since 'Air Cube' way back in #194). It's stories like these three that keep me subscribing.

Ray Cluley

Interzone provided a cracking load of favourites in 2013, many of which I believe would be right at home in some of the year's 'best of' anthologies. 'iRobot' by Guy Haley: Loved this. Loved it. I've read it several times now and use it in my creative writing class as an example of what can be done with only a couple of thousand words. This piece suggests more story

than it tells, and the lack of detail, together with the brevity, makes for an emotive story that reminds us that we're a mere speck on the planet, destined to destroy ourselves. With some effective moments of humour, this is a poignant melancholy story without descending into overt cautionary tale, and all the more powerful for it. Probably my favourite of the year.

Soon Lee

It has been another very good year for *Interzone*. I enjoy the variety of stories published of generally very readable quality, and regularly excellent. If I had to choose just one best story it would be 'The Hareton K-12 County School and Adult Extension' by James Van Pelt. It would not be at all surprising to see it feature in forthcoming best of the year anthologies. The other stories I'm upvoting (no downvotes from me) are the ones that were memorable in some way and are the sorts of stories I would like to see more in future issues of *Interzone*.

Darrell Sefton

I have been subscribing to *Interzone* since #217 and have noticed a trend over recent years for more 'fantasy' and less 'sci-fi', though I acknowledge the line dividing the two is a thin blurred one at best. In some (albeit rare) cases stories have seemed better suited to TTA's sister publication *Black Static*. Although I far prefer 'classic' techie sci-fi (I'm an engineer after all), I find the overwhelming majority of what's found in *Interzone* to be engaging and very well written, even if I don't necessarily enjoy every single story. Fortunately (as far as I'm concerned) there seems to have been a resurgence of 'classic' sci-fi in recent issues. Anything by Jason Sanford is always good and I really enjoyed the ongoing stories in Lavie Tidhar's milieu. Oh and despite some initial misgivings, I like the new smaller format. And obviously the cover art, which is always of exceptional quality. And the book/DVD/film reviews! I'd write more but I have to get on and I'm sure you've already slipped into a coma after my blathering. All in all, keep up the good work!

Nick Camm

My vote for this year's best story has to be Philip Suggars' 'Automatic Diamante'. Brave, fresh, dark and funny and just the right side of experimental. A story that managed to evoke sympathy for a psychopathic killing machine. Simply splendid.

J.B. Zeelie

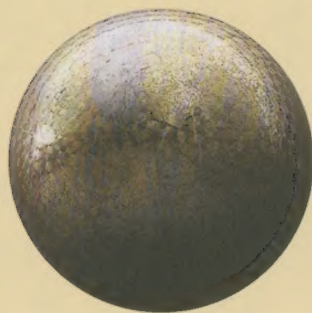
It was another great year for *Interzone*. The general standard has remained steadily high, which is a testament to the editorial staff of the magazine... I look forward to 2014's stories, as well as those for years to come.

David Thomas

Once again the excellent stories of Lavie Tidhar have been a real highlight, with the enjoyable 'The Book Seller' a particularly strong contender. However, my choice is 'Dark Gardens' by Greg Kurzawa. It's haunting, strange and full of images which linger. Wonderful.

TOP TEN SHORT STORIES

- 1= 'Technarion'
Sean McMullen
ISSUE #248
- 1= 'Triolet'
Jess Hyslop
ISSUE #246
- 3 'Paprika'
Jason Sanford
ISSUE #249
- 4 'Build Guide'
Helen Jackson
ISSUE #244
- 5 'Sentry Duty'
Nigel Brown
ISSUE #246
- 6 'The Book Seller'
Lavie Tidhar
ISSUE #244
- 7 'Trans-Siberia: An Account of a Journey'
Sarah Brooks
ISSUE #249
- 8 'The Kindest Man in Stormland'
John Shirley
ISSUE #249
- 9 'Dark Gardens'
Greg Kurzawa
ISSUE #248
- 10 'Ad Astra'
Carole Johnstone
ISSUE #248



THE POSSET POT

NEIL WILLIAMSON

ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER

The day I found the posset pot was the last time I got myself into serious bubble trouble. Scared me shitless at the time, letting my guard slip like that and I admit it put me on the downer that, ultimately, sealed poor Ettrick's fate. I'm not writing this as a confession, but he deserves a record. I miss the old bastard more than I would have thought possible. Every day I wish he'd not been so stupid, but even I can't shoulder the responsibility for what happened to him. Some things just happen.

Ettrick always maintained that it was *me* who had a death wish. Said it was understandable, given my circumstances. But Ettrick didn't live in the real world. He didn't understand that, since the bubbles, survival had become a matter of pushing your luck. If you wanted to eat, if you wanted heat – let's not even mention the occasional luxuries he was quite happy for me to bring home from my expeditions – you had to be out there, where the bubbles were.



I was picking my way down the embankment from the University tower towards the River Kelvin. My thoughts had strayed into memory, thinking about how it used to look. That smooth slope of greensward, the trees, the southern aspect of the city stretching out beyond; not the weird moonscape it's become, precisely cratered as if God had been at it with his ice-cream scoop. Like a scene out of some...no, see that's the thing: Hollywood never imagined an apocalypse as bizarre as this.

Dwelling on the past like that, even for a handful of seconds, was deadly, and I missed the tell-tale wink of microturbulence, the rainbow shimmer that presaged the incursion. The bubble was suddenly just *there*, hanging above the ground a yard to my left and growing fast. I scrambled up the slope, watched it carefully from a safer distance. As always, it was exactly as thin and beautiful as the ones we blew from detergent solution when we were kids. It expanded quickly, but stopped at beach ball size. I spun around, looking for multiples, but there were none. Only then did I let out my breath. While I was fucking lucky that it had stopped at the size that it had, I wondered what I'd have done if it had grown larger. Large enough. I wondered if I'd have risked it.

"Jesus Christ, Aird. You've got to pay attention." Enunciating my self-admonishment righted my priorities, reoriented me towards survival and away from recrimination, but I kept it to a mutter. Even if you are one of the last people left, it's still not right to talk to yourself in public.

I watched the bubble run its course. Despite the havoc they've wrought, they remain fascinating. They're so perfectly, delicately constructed. Like actual soap bubbles in so many ways, except they don't drift in the air currents. They hardly even distort the light. This one hovered a foot above the weeds, rotating slowly. As always, I jotted down the details – location, size, height, spin – before the tell-tale darkening of the sphere's surface began. I call it *steeling* for the way a bubble's appearance changes to resemble a huge ball bearing in the last few moments before its integrity collapses. I backed away a little further. You never know what can come through in an exchange.

When the bubble popped, a rush of air ruffled my hair and set some newly decapitated dandelion stalks nodding like proverbial headless chickens. A rush of air, but nothing else. *Sky again*, I wrote, then breathed deeply, catching the exotic lemongrass and pepper aroma of the air of Elsewhere. I felt the prickle of tears.

The sky was deepening behind the remains of the University. The building's lovely, overworked symmetry has been sliced through so often now, sphere after sphere intersecting with the remains of the masonry, that those once ornate neo-gothic spires have been turned into a forest of precarious, delicate peaks; imagine African termite mounds modelled by rudimentary algorithm, but too slender, too sharp. Sometimes, unable to support themselves, bits fall off. I don't think I'll ever accept Glasgow's new topography. It changed so fast. It's barely recognisable as a city any more.

There was little else of note on the trek home. In Kelvingrove, the last tree had toppled. The crown lay on the ground like a head of broccoli, but the entire trunk was missing and, with it, a sizeable bowl of roadway. The bubble that took it must have been huge. Before our world began to be swapped piece by piece for another universe, trees wouldn't have been high on my list of things I'd miss. But the place looks so empty without them.

And I saw a foam in Yorkhill. It appeared along the side of a bisected Vauxhall Vectra, spilling along the car's flank like shaken up lemonade. It effervesced, sizzled and left a trail of acne-like scarring across the door and roof.

The streets around here are always the worst for me. Not because of how much they've changed, rather the extent to which they haven't. Within the length of a street the signs of bubble activity decrease so dramatically that it is only too easy to remember the days when the city was whole.

I always try to avoid glancing along Yorkhill Street. I always fail. Karen and I viewed a flat there only a week before the first bubbles appeared. The Estate Agent's board is still there, planted hopefully beside the door of the tenement close. As if the housing market's suffering a temporary blip and will soon recover. Ironi-

cally, it's in an infinitely more desirable area now. Ettrick calls this the *golden circle*. Two or three blocks of tenements that have inexplicably retained their full complement of roofs, walls and floors. They'd go for a bomb if there was anyone left here to put an offer in.

But there isn't. There was just me and Ettrick. And now there's just me.

Ettrick's flat is at the very centre of the circle. The tenement is in the middle of the block, and the flat is on the middle floor. Insulated. We never worked out how or why. It was this miraculous intactness that drew me here after the evacuation. We'd both had different motives for staying behind. Ettrick was agoraphobic, or so he claimed anyway, and I'd sworn not to leave without Karen. Stupidly, some would say, but I couldn't help that. Anyway, once we'd discovered each other it made sense to stay together. To try and help each other. It's what humans are supposed to do, isn't it?

Inside the flat, I let the shutting door announce my return while I shrugged off my pack and hung my duffel coat on the antique coat stand. The hall smelled of Mr Sheen.

"Who is it?" Ettrick was fearful even when he had no earthly reason to be.

I used to make smart-arsed replies, each of them equally impossible – *it's the postman, the tax inspector, Julian fucking Clary* – but the humour wore out fast. "Just me," I said.

Ettrick appeared at the kitchen door. "We're out of polish." He was wearing marigolds. "I don't suppose..."

I sighed inwardly, but Ettrick's constant cleaning was the least of his faults. "Get the kettle on," I said. "And let's have a look."

I put my pack on the table.

"Where did you get to today?" Ettrick said, as he slid up the window sash and retrieved a jam jar from the row brimming with the previous night's rain. There was early speculation that the bubbles might affect the weather, but Glasgow's always been a rain town. If there was one thing we aren't short of, it's fresh water. He poured it into a saucepan and lit the camping stove.

While he did that, I took a marker pen and hatched a series of lines on the city map tacked to the wall. "St George's Cross," I said. "Some of

Maryhill too." I fished out my notebook next, and began to mark my bubble observations on the map as well. The foam instance was right on the edge of our protected zone. In contrast to the red scrawls and black crosshatching, the circle of yellowing street map really did look golden.

"That's too far away."

"Not if we're going to get through the winter." I lined up my booty on the table. Two invaluable camping gas cylinders. Assorted cleaning products. A catering sized bag of Tetley tea bags. Two pigeon carcasses wrapped in newspaper.

The pan on the stove began to bubble. "Are those fresh?" Ettrick patted nervously at his wispy hair. He was kind of freaky about disease.

"Killed them with my own hands." It hadn't been much of a feat. The birds had been tottering around a garage forecourt blinded by foam.

"Good. Been a while since we had some decent protein."

I smiled at that. He was always like a pernickety househusband criticising the weekly shopping. Next came my own personal triumph. The Asda bag rattled as I extracted it.

Ettrick fell on the package then curled his lip. "Cruet?"

Cruet. Philistine.

"Trust me, you'd not be looking forward to this pigeon half as much without a bit of salt and pepper. And look." I held up a fistful of jars. "Tarragon, basil, coriander. Chilli flakes, man! And they said civilisation was dead." I had no intention of telling Ettrick that I'd almost broken a leg liberating these little inconsequentials. Getting up towards Maryhill Road, underground bubble activity had caused subsidence. A winding close staircase had given way and I'd narrowly saved myself from a fall. The homes themselves were not as intact as they had appeared from the street either. It's hard to tell sometimes. You can view a building from all angles and your hopes rise, only to find that it's little more than a shell when you get inside. This one wasn't that bad, but there wasn't a great deal to salvage either.

There were bodies, though. At least, parts of bodies. Back at the beginning, when bubbles were popping up everywhere and the city, the country, the world were rife with panic, fleeing once and fleeing again, there were a lot of bod-

ies. From the catastrophically dismembered to the apparently intact whose injuries had been wholly internal, but no less agonising, to the ones who had escaped the bubbles but nevertheless fallen victim to the dissolution of society that had followed.

I never got used to the bodies. It might have helped to talk about them but Ettrick forbade any mention of the subject. Even by that time, when most of the carnage had been scooped off to Elsewhere along with everything else, I still stumbled across them on a regular basis. Here I found a man's decayed head and abdomen, face down in a crawling position, a child's arm in one green tee-shirt sleeve nearby, both severed and sealed by the spherical section that passed through the laminate flooring, the ash deadening, the joists and the downstairs ceiling. I was quick about jumping across and performing a ruthless excavation of the kitchen's cabinets.

If we were forbidden from mentioning the bodies, we talked about the bubbles constantly. We agreed on some things, disagreed on others. The reason for it all we laid confidently at the door of CERN, or some similar and perhaps less public enterprise. A next-generation LHC somewhere malfunctioning, causing unpredictable and uncontrollable localised spot eruptions of other universes into our own. That much we borrowed from the theorists on TV before we lost the media, and presumably the theorists as well.

Beyond that it was all down to speculation. How many universes? One? A million? *Overlapping earths*, Ettrick said once before dismissing the idea in favour of the one he would stick with: that the bubbles were wormholes briefly connecting our Earth to random points in its own history. *Not Elsewheres, but Elsewhens*. He produced a dense stream of logic to support his theory that was hard to find a chink in, and grew more robust every time we returned to the subject, but being out there every day, I knew he was wrong. Instead, I favoured his comment about overlapping Earths, and constructed my own body of evidence to support that theory. I imagined two versions of the same planet, similar apart from some fundamental differences, somehow passing each other in space-time.

Points of contact happening in different places, at different times. Maybe even different planetary inclinations. Here we mostly got their air, while on the other side of the Earth we'd heard reports of the opposite, rains of rubble. If that was true, though, this period of conjunction was limited. The planets were already passing, and beginning to drift apart again. The frequency of the bubbles was dropping off.

Time was running out.

"What else did you find?"

There were some books. Some paperbacks, but also a few of the showy hardcovers that Ettrick preferred for his Library. I hadn't even looked at the titles, but the old man seemed happy enough.

"There's something more."

He looked up from riffling the pages of a *Lonely Planet* guide to Nova Scotia. "Something came back?"

I nodded. "In the kitchen where I got the spices. A bubble had taken out part of the work surface, a slice of turf wedged into the hole in its place. Flowers and everything." Trying not to remember the astringent scent of those flowers, the weird olive colour and silken texture of the grass. I reached into the pack one last time and extracted what I'd found.

"Oh, my." Ettrick peered at the object. "This is quite wonderful."

It was rare that anything but atmosphere came through from Elsewhere. Rarer still that it survived intact. Especially something this fragile.

The object was like an odd combination of a tea pot and a large mug. It had a spout, and perpendicular to that jutted two handles. There was a lid too that reminded me of a cookie jar lid. The pot was constructed from glazed earthenware, yellow with a pattern of detailed but unfamiliar red flowers.

Ettrick lifted the lid, sniffed cautiously. "Incredible," he said, scraping at the inside and examining his fingernail. "I believe someone's actually *used* this recently."

"Used it for what?"

"For drinking out of. It's a posset pot, of course."

He pounced on my mystification. "*A posset pot*," Ettrick repeated, almost slow enough for sarcasm. "For the preparation and consumma-

tion of possets. Don't you know what a posset is?"

I was going to reply that I hadn't a clue – Ettrick's petty general knowledge oneupmanship had got tired months ago – but surprisingly the word rang a dull bell. Something I'd learned during my time at catering college. "It's a kind of old fashioned drink isn't it?"

Ettrick nodded. "It was used as a cure for colds and the like, but it had no actual medicinal properties. The Eighteenth Century equivalent of comfort food. Hot milk curdled with booze, sometimes made into a custard with eggs, and flavoured with cinnamon, nutmeg, that sort of thing. You ate the gloop with a spoon, and drank the alcohol through the spout."

"But you said Eighteenth Century?"

Ettrick nodded.

"So what was anyone doing eating out of a three hundred year old antique?"

Ettrick twinkled. "This is no antique," he said.

"No," I said.

"It's more likely than—"

"You don't know," I cut across him. "If you smelled the air when a bubble pops..." I waved any further discussion away, pointed at the little pan rattling away on the stove. "Kettle's boiling."

He scurried to turn it off. We might have had a surfeit of water, but we couldn't waste fuel. Even so, a good cuppa was the one luxury neither of us had been willing to relinquish just yet.

We drank in silence. I stared at the map and the activity chart, aware that Ettrick was watching but really not in the mood. Conversation between us was limited at the best of times. It wasn't as if we had much in common. One of us was an IT guy whose skills were so obsolete it wasn't even funny. The other, a retired academic. One had a restlessness born of technology withdrawal. Even now, I still feel the phantom umbilical of the wired world. Ache for a Facebook update, a tweet, a minute of Grand Theft Auto. Ettrick just got happier the more books he could add to his shelves.

One of us had been a virtual shut-in for years. The only thing he missed about the world was that Tesco didn't deliver any more.

The other missed his friends. His family.

Karen went right at the start of it all. She'd



dawdled to look in the window of a Byres Road estate agent. I'd turned, laughing at her dogged determination to find something we could afford, walked back towards her. And then she was in a bubble, surprised, astonished, beautiful in the sun-shimmered construct like Glinda, the Good Witch of the Fucking North. She'd started to come out, an arm, a shoulder emerging, but she was too slow. The bubble steeled fast. I hadn't a clue then. If I'd kept my head there might have been time to pull her all the way out, but I panicked, pushed her back in. Surrendered her to Elsewhere.

"The bubbles are definitely getting less frequent," I said at length.

"Are you sure?"

I shrugged. "The ones I see anyway. There are more singletons, not so many clusters." I took a breath. "And the majority bring high air."

"You don't know that."

It was as logical as I could make it. When the air was frigid, odourless, it made sense that it came from higher in the atmosphere. Much too high. When the air was warm and spiced, it came from close to the ground, to trees and grass and earth, but those occasions, like the bubbles themselves, were getting rarer.

"Dinner, then?" I said, and the worry eased from the corners of Ettrick's mouth.

"I dug up a shaw of tatties," he said proudly.

"Better get scrubbing then." I grabbed a carver from the knife block and the pigeons from the table. "And I mean scrubbing, not peeling. We can't afford to waste the nutrition."

The sun was pinking and peaching the high freckles of cirrus, the evening air cool by the time I finished with the birds. I stretched stiffly and looked along the backs of the tenements, the reflecting windows afire. A peaceful apocalypse.

In the kitchen, I pan fried the pigeons with thyme and garlic, a dribble of precious oil. The potatoes I dusted with dried rosemary. It tasted about as good as anything we'd eaten in months.

Afterwards, Ettrick made himself scarce. I heard books being slipped from shelves, riffled through, pushed emphatically back in place. I let out a deep sigh, begrudging for the thousandth time that that archaic medium had survived while the endless versatility of electronic com-

munication that had all but replaced it had vanished overnight.

I got the wind-up radio down. The decals of the inane afternoon show for which it must once have been a phone-in prize were decoloured, the goofy leers of the presenters almost faded to white, as if their owners were vanishing from history like Marty McFly's family, and like the movie they were in too. The red plastic winked in the candlelight like kola cubes. I wound the handle twenty, thirty, forty rotations to get the clockwork running and extended the aerial. The soft static was like the sea. Distant and disheartening. Nevertheless, I bent my ear to the speaker and inched the tuning dial up through the bands. Up and back down. The sound of nothing.

"Any luck"? Ettrick reappeared holding a couple of books. The cover of the topmost one showed a picture of Michael Aspel standing in front of some stately home.

"Bloody hell," I said. "The Antiques Roadshow? How old is that?"

Ettrick flipped to the front. "Nineteen Eighty Four," he said. "But it hardly invalidates the contents..."

"I know." I held my hands up. "It just brings back memories. So, what about it?"

Ettrick showed me a glossy picture of a piece of pottery that bore some resemblance to the pot the bubble had left.

"I found a recipe too," Ettrick, opening the other, much older, book. The Household Companion. "Look. Cinnamon, eggs. The alcohol they used was *sack*. Do you know what sack was?"

I ignored the invitation to ramble along this particular sidetrack of Ettrick's esoteric knowledge. "My grandmother used to make us hot milk with a drop of whisky in it," I said, and immediately my mouth remembered the warm comforting milk, the aromatic alcohol making me drowsy as I nestled in front of the fire and the mantle clock ticked and the TV murmured. Wanting to fight the drowse of my eyelids so I could tell the kids at school that I'd stayed up to watch Kojak. "Oh, God, what I'd give right now..."

"For what?"

I didn't know how to answer him. For a taste of

that milk, for certain. But also for the simplicity of childhood, when there was nothing greater to worry about than peer acceptance. Or if not that, for the time when milk was in the fridge, the twelve year old Caol Ila was in the booze cupboard, and Kojak could be tormented on a whim.

"Fuck," I said. "It's all gone."

Ettrick's face fell, and I knew he suspected a dark wave ready to break over me. "You need a drink," he said. "We don't have whisky, but a drop of port perhaps."

We had three partial bottles that I'd looted from a Threshers. The glass had been fused to a razor sharp plane across what would have been the necks, so we tried to drill through the bases. A lot of effort and a considerable amount of mess later, I said, "Well, that's it. We might as well just kill ourselves now."

Ettrick froze with anxiety.

"I was joking," I sighed. "I've got plenty reasons to keep going." I tried a reassuring smile. "Well, one anyway." I couldn't help the way it sounded. He knew I wasn't referring to him.

"Karen's not coming back, Jim," he said. "No-one ever comes back."

"I know." He still didn't understand. I wasn't waiting for Karen to come back.

"Hardly anything of use or value comes through on this side of the exchange."

"I know, Ettrick." I was waiting for a bubble – the *right* bubble – and to have the guts to take the chance, but how could I ever tell him that?

"Which is why—"

"I know, man. You don't have to spell it out."

"Which is why we have to treat everything that does as a gift."

"A gift?" I got up and retrieved the china pot from the table. "How incredibly useful." I was almost shouting now, but had to get it out. "How fucking *generous* our universe is, don't you think? It takes everything we had, and everyone we knew and loved, and what do we get in return? A lovely antique fucking *chamber pot*." I'd had no intention to do so but suddenly the pot was raised above my head and all I could think of was the satisfying crash it would make. Then Ettrick was holding my arms and for a moment it was as if I was the old man, him the younger. I lost the strength to hold the thing, my

legs folded beneath me, but Ettrick was strong, kept both of us up. He eased the pot from my hands and lowered me into a chair.

"Fuck," I said.

He hovered, uncertain. "Jim..."

I got up so fast that the chair unbalanced. He caught that too.

"Fuck off, Ettrick."

I went to bed.

I NEVER LOST THE FEAR OF WAKING UP TO discover that a bubble had manifested around my bed and transported some portion of me to Elsewhere.

After Karen went, that fear had become half a hope.

There was no bubble in the night. Grey dawn shimmered the bookshelves in Ettrick's spare room with an otherworldly sheen, but there was no mistaking this for Elsewhere.

With a rain jar I drowned the grogginess and the lingering tatters of dark thought. I didn't bother with breakfast, wanting to be out before Ettrick stirred, but in the hall I found a discarded scrap of paper that stopped me. Ettrick's handwriting was predictably neat. His shopping list unambiguous.

Eggs – powdered?

Milk – UHT/condensed?

Sack – good sherry, not the cooking stuff.

The rain became a downpour as I reached the edge of the golden circle. I forced myself to stop and work out which direction Ettrick had taken. He was a smart man, but he was thinking irrationally. Whether he was trying to prove that he was able to pull his weight after all or thought he could make me *feel better* with a warm drink, he was off his head. Ettrick may even have listened attentively when I related my daily experiences of the bubbles, but apart from a couple of encounters right back at the beginning he didn't *know* what it was like out here. He didn't know the signs, wouldn't have a clue what to do if he got himself in trouble.

All the same, if he'd gone to the bother of making a shopping list, wasn't it possible that he'd also taken a moment to check the map? What would he see? The area I'd not attempted to scavenge yet. The place I'd been leaving until we were

completely out of alternatives. The city centre.

I headed east. Slowly, searching and calling his name. There was no response and I saw no activity, but that didn't mean there hadn't been any. I skirted between the crater fields and pinnacle forests that had been the Kelvin Hall and the art galleries, but saw no sign. By the time I traversed the length of western Sauchiehall Street I was soaked through and cursing the old bastard's name even as I yelled it out.

At Charing Cross, the Victorian tenements of the West End and the city centre had been permanently separated in the 1970s by the deep cut of the motorway. After the bubbles, it became a precipitous trench that I'd hoped might be safely circumvented by a mile or more's detour to the north in search of a place where the collapsed roadway might be crossed. The same would be true to the south, even if I was brave enough to attempt a river crossing downstream from the shifting, cracking, rubble weir that was what remained of the Kingston Bridge.

If Ettrick had made it this far, he would have discovered that this was the reason that I'd left the area untouched.

But there was another way in.

I wouldn't have chanced the pedestrian foot-bridge unless I was absolutely desperate. The concrete arch was almost nibbled completely away, the iron railings all but missing. If it was still just about possible to cross, only a madman would try it. As I mounted the ramp, I saw something that both reassured and chilled me. A beacon-bright red tube of flimsy polyester, caught on a stanchion and flapping in the breeze like a wind sock. It was a sleeve from a red cagoule that I had last seen neatly on a shelf in Ettrick's hall. I had often sneered internally that a man who never went out should own something so outlandish as a pac-a-mac. Now I forced myself to examine it: the crimped cuff at the narrow end, the melt-blackened plastic at the other. No blood though, either on the sleeve or on the ground. Which meant chances were good that Ettrick hadn't been wearing the thing when the bubble appeared. I imagined the rain coming on, the hapless old man unpacking the thing, shaking it out and getting in a fankle even as a bubble formed and steeled inches from the back of his

head. Jumping, surprised by the *pop* and the fact he was holding on to this suddenly useless, incongruous piece of material and actually breathing the air of Elsewhere into his own lungs.

Well, that would shut the fucking know-all up on that subject at least.

The crossing was worse than I feared. With every step I felt the concrete span move, as if unsure of the earth that anchored it. The moorings were exposed and crumbling into the pit below. The rain swirled around me, my feet stumbling as I navigated the edges of holes and, once, a pile of deposited sod. The Elsewhere grass had been a velvety olive colour and sported tiny star-shaped flowers. Both were long since withered and faded but I couldn't help kneeling, breathing deep. The aroma of the other place was barely detectable.

I bellowed into the wind. Cried and cursed until my throat was raw and my fists turned white.

I FOUND ETRICK IN A GLASS-FRONTED shopping centre. The windows were peppered with circular holes like someone had used it for golf practice. He was in a whisky shop. Standing, soaked, in his cardigan, with a wire basket filled with liquor and peering at a bottle of *Oloroso* like a connoisseur on a spree.

"What the *fuck* are you doing?"

It was hard to tell if I'd given him a fright or if the stretching 'O' of his lips as he turned to face me was the beginning of a smile or a word of welcome. It was hard to tell because, in the second it took for him to react to my challenge, Ettrick was enveloped by the shimmering skin of a bubble. It grew that fast. One moment, a wink in the air, a point disturbance in front of his chest; then a rush of expanding air and there it was. It cleared his head easily and encompassed the shopping basket with room to spare.

It was close to being the *perfect* bubble.

The only problem was that its lowest extremity stopped some eight inches from the floor. I walked towards him, palms calming, mouth opening to tell him everything was going to be all right. I *did*. The words were right there on the tip of my tongue. There was no question that I was going to save him. It was only the question of whether I would be close enough to exchange

places that gave me an instant's pause. I took two more strides, and took the breath needed to give my petrified neighbour the instructions for his safety. In a matter of seconds he would be safe and I'd have at least a chance of being with Karen again.

That was what was going to happen.

But universes do not operate according to our preferred order of things. They are not serendipitous; not kind or just or fair.

The bubble steeled rapidly. Ettrick's terror as the skin opaqued to a thunderous, oily silver, leaving only trouser cuffs and sorry shoes emerging from its base, was apparent.

"Jump."

I thought he wasn't going to make it. I'd never seen him do more than shuffle around the flat. Then one foot rose into the bubble, and after a brief wobble, the other followed it. I imagined him, inside, off balance and realising that he wasn't going to just *hang* there. Even as his feet started to return to earth, his hands must have flown outwards, the corner of his basket escaping the sphere just at the moment that the structure, and all inside it, vanished to Elsewhere.

The pop was a thunderclap that shocked the breath from me and caused the already perforated window to come crashing down. A sudden wind. A belt of coldness.

The sheered corner of the basket spun on the floor. Its edges were melted.

Nothing else came through. Not even the faintest aroma of the air of Elsewhere. I was sure the bubble had exchanged with near-vacuum. I thought of two planets in two universes passing, exchanging earth and air for a time before moving apart. For ever.

THE BUBBLES ARE RARE NOW. AND THOSE that do appear bring nothing but cold. The idea that I might be jumping into space has dampened my enthusiasm, but it has not killed the urge completely. Perhaps, when circumstances are right again.

And perhaps it won't be necessary after all.

The posset pot, if that's what it was, saw me through the winter. I found an untapped off-licence closer to home and brewed up a variety of warming cocktails during the dark months. In

my head, Ettrick and I went over and over the theories. I even read some of his books.

I went out at dawn this morning for the first time in ages. I don't know why, it just felt right. Kelvingrove in the spring was always beautiful. Now, it is again. Beautiful, and strange. The craters are filled with grasses and flowers; the spider-spindle ruins of the buildings are cloaked with encroaching vines.

It's like a different world.

Earlier, I stood in the middle of what I can barely now recognise as Kelvin Way. The air is warming, and it carries a scent. Something familiar. Sharp lemongrass, hot pepper.


I think of Elsewhere – and *Elsewhen*.

And I'm starting to hope. That all I have to do is wait until the bubbles return.

Neil Williamson's stories have appeared in *Interzone* several times, but not for ages. You can find some of those stories in his collection *The Ephemera*, which also contains stories first published in TTA Press's "legendary" debut magazine *The Third Alternative*. Neil has recently published his first novel, *The Moon King* (NewCon Press), reviewed in this issue's Book Zone, where he is also interviewed.

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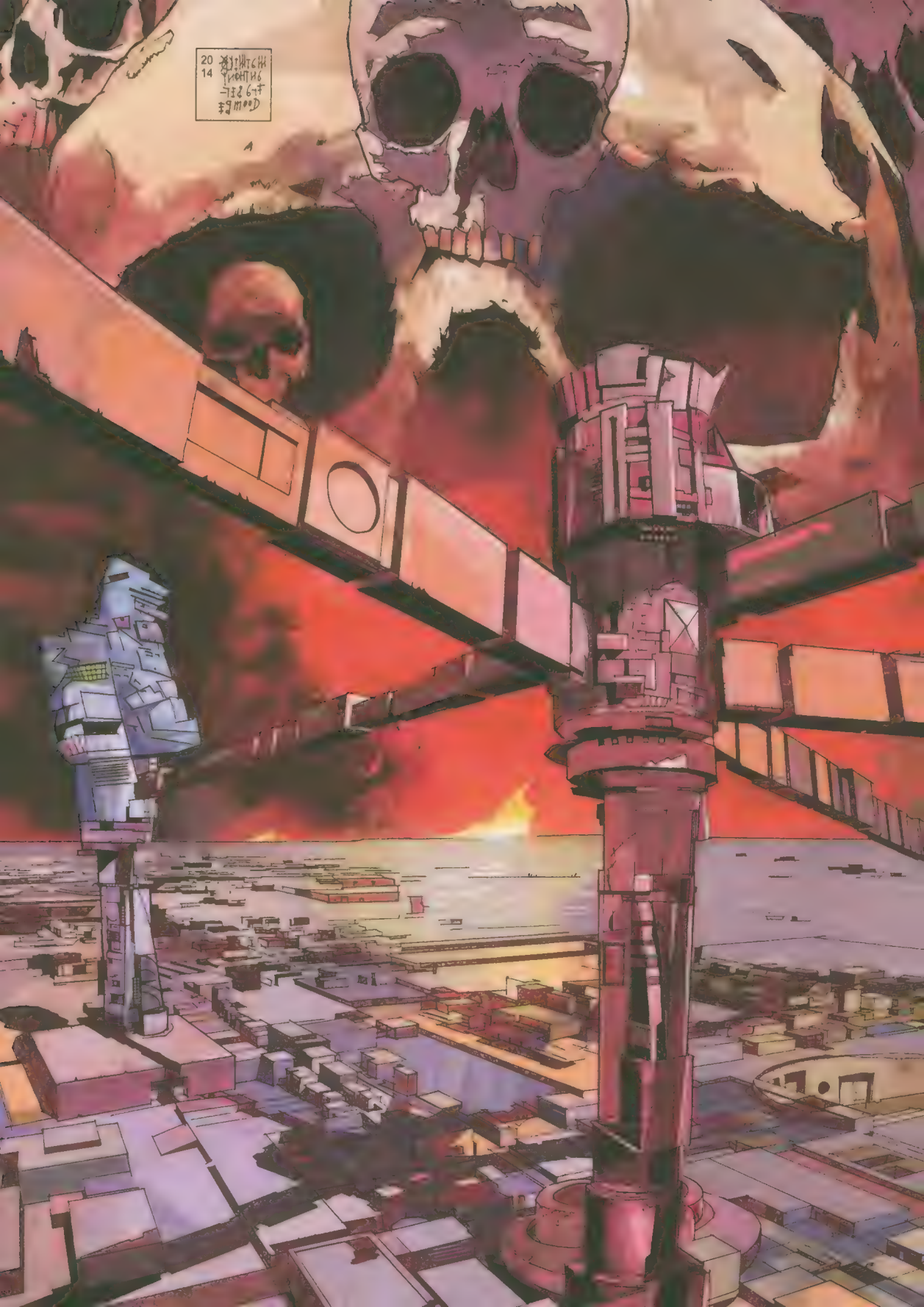
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Katharine Duckett coordinates book coverage and author features for Tor.com by day, and writes weird and speculative fiction by night. Her story 'Sexagesimal' was voted *Apex Magazine's* 2012 Story of the Year, and has been produced as a live theatre piece by Daniel Flores Dance. She lives in Brooklyn.

ILLUSTRATED BY WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE

THE MORTUARIES KATHARINE E.K. DUCKETT

Tem loved the mortuaries, though no one he knew was dead. Still he would beg to go, to grasp the hand of any adult willing to wind down those plush-carpeted stairways, past the sleek vaults, inviting and bright.

They wouldn't let him push the buttons – they were too high for him, anyhow – but upon his request his uncle or aunt would, with a sigh, oblige, pressing the fingerprint-proof rectangle. Back the panel would slide, revealing the vault's interior, protected by a pane of spotless glass.

Inside was a body in any variety of poses: some sat on couches in replicas of their living rooms; some stood beside loved ones or cradled children in their arms, standing on a set made to resemble a beach, a backyard, a jungle, long gone; some leapt or swung or slid, their limbs arrested midway through some athletic motion.

From a small speaker outside the vault played a recording: sometimes of the deceased, or their family members or friends. Sometimes only a song played, and Tem wondered if that meant the person had died alone, without anyone who cared to narrate, even briefly, his or her life.

Most recordings were breathy, uneven, but a few of them had been recorded by professional narrators, hired to tell the stories of the mortuary's most important residents, of the luminaries from Estkos who had been interred in the tombs when the tower was still new. Tem learned more from these stories than he did in school: his teachers only spoke of ancient times or the present, and never of the recent past.

"Here stands Anika Zheng, inventor of 'noot', the revolutionary food substitute that ended hunger throughout the Coalition. With a pleasing, gelatinous texture, all the nutrients necessary for health, and recycled fiber for regular digestion, noot, in all its varieties, represents the biggest advancement in food production and consumption in human history."

"Lucas Schoenjahn, the last president of the former United States, architect of Perestroika II, and pillar of strength during the energy and climate crises of Eurasia's collapse, worked with the Coalition to redraw the outdated borders of the continent and continue the important work of reclaiming resources from destroyed, unsalvageable territories across the world, while resettling their citizens, remembering their histories, and preserving their rich languages and cultures."

These narrations were dry, but Tem liked the whistling, twanging voice that told the story of the barrel-chested founder of Brixton's, who stood at the helm of a drillship, fake crystals of ice clinging to his red mustache. "Born here in Andersenville to parents resettled from the submerged isle of England, Henry Gerald Brixton went on to conquer the Arctic during the oil booms, garner a fortune in the multi-trillions, and perfect the plastination process, first developed by Gunther von Hagens, that makes the displays you see in this mortuary possible. When stored and maintained properly, bodies retain the feel of living flesh, and will remain intact for a minimum of five *billion* years. Woo-ee! Brixton honored his small hometown by choosing it as the site of his most ambitious project, and we are mighty proud to call him our native son."

Tem's maternal grandmother, who had died before he was born, posed in a fake field on the fourteenth floor, her hands outstretched to caress its flimsy plastic wheat, her hair still as

dark and curly as his mother's. The luxury of the vaults had declined by the time she entered Brixton's: though still polished, the newer tombs featured simpler scenes, with fewer bells and whistles than the tombs of those lucky enough to die during the final energy booms of Perestroika II.

His grandmother was the reason Tem's family was allowed to visit Brixton's, the pass that got them through the heavily guarded steel doors, through the retinal scanners and metal detectors. After the obligatory visit to his grandmother's tomb, Tem pulled his chaperone by the hand to see his favorite vaults: often the ones that contained children his own age, who he liked to imagine would be his friends, if he were in the mortuary, too. He also liked the vaults that featured fantastical settings, like blooming gardens, or the fully automated kitchens his parents had used in their youths, when the world abounded with miraculous technological innovations.

The adults who indulged Tem's fancy – relatives, mostly, never his mother and father – only brought him to Brixton's, the larger of the mortuaries, more famous and respectable. He didn't know then why they never went to Morton's, even though it was next door: even though, when they reached the bottom of Brixton's, he could see the entrance across the covered pavilion bridging the two mortuary towers. "Let's go!" he'd say, tugging that chaperoning hand, but the refusal was immediate and firm.

All Tem glimpsed of Morton's was the scarlet awning of its entrance, and sometimes a heavy-set man, in rumpled suit and undone tie, slouching on a stool near the door, red-stubbed chin sinking into his neck. He winked at Tem when he caught him looking, and Tem always turned away, more curious than before.

The mortuaries stood twenty stories high: one red, one blue, shiny and twisting against the clouds. Around them stretched the low, flat town of Andersenville, occupying miles upon miles of what was once "prairie," though Tem couldn't grasp the meaning of the word. From the observation deck atop Brixton's, not a patch of earth was left: microregions and stack flats crowded the land, nudging into the neighboring territories.

Emerging from the cool silence of Brixton's foyer, the stench and sound of the living hit Tem before the mortuary doors clicked shut behind him. His chaperones flanked him as they progressed down Lykeaway, the avenue leading from the mortuaries to the center of town, where Tem's family – his quick-tongued mother, his silent father, his eight loudmouthed cousins, three aunts, two uncles, and one surviving grandparent, his father's mother – lived in a small, featureless apartment on the second floor of a concrete stack flat. Tem ground his teeth as they plunged into Andersenville's crowds, his eyes on his feet, aching inside their weathered sneakers. The crush of adults blocked out the sun: Tem wanted to cry, though he could not summon enough air for the act.

At school, Tem spent his days fantasizing about Brixton's, about its floors of silent, dignified dead, about the silver elevator shooting to the tower's top, about the serenity of the lobbies occupying the center of every floor. Often, he imagined he was king of his own tower, one rising up in the middle of his classroom. It would spring from the floor one day, treelike and sturdy, and Tem would sit inside, where it was quiet and dark. From inside, via a wide screen, he would view the children and teachers below, giving his answers to the questions they asked, and, when bored, turning to all the other pursuits available at his fingertips, the encyclopedias of extinct animals and celestial spheres, the 3D puzzles, the endless supply of pencils and papers and clay and paint and yarn and dirt and beads and copper and straw and crayons and silk he could use in any way that he pleased. He would never have to learn about textiles and plastics and the machines in the recycling plant again, which was all they talked about in school: he would learn how to make new things, not just recycle the old things the people before him had left behind.

He would be safe there, in his tower, writing and reading and exploring in peace. It was the way he'd always imagined school should be, the way he used to think of school before he was thrown into the noisy, dirty pit of it. His classroom was bursting, with sixty to seventy students shoved against the walls, using windowsills as chairs, sharing one beaten-up book between a

dozen kids. Even bathroom breaks were taken in groups, with shifts of boys rotating in and out of the low stalls, where they all squatted in a line, their taunting cries echoing off the green cement walls, smeared with feces and chewed gum.

The push and shove of schoolyard survival reached a fever pitch when his class spilled outside, into the days that were getting hotter every year. Tem ducked and dodged his way through the crowd, sometimes reaching safety under a sagging playset fashioned from tires and splintering wood. More often, though, he found himself caught in the crush, harassed and teased for his small stature, for his high voice and quiet obsessions.

He was teased at home, too, by his older cousins, who ranged in age from eight to eighteen. Those on his mother's side of the family tended to share her curly locks and olive skin, while fair hair and pale complexions marked those on his father's: those features had come over with his grandmother from the country she fled, in the years before Perestroika II. She used to catch Tem's wrist as he passed her chair, kneading his doughy hand with swollen fingers before he could pull it back. "This is what they want to take away! This whiteness! All these blacks and browns out there, they're having babies! So many babies!" She peered at Tem, her eyes polished marbles in a sunken bird's face. "Do you know what's going to happen if we don't have more babies? This whiteness—" she pressed her fingertips into Tem's palm, her nails pressing into the flesh "—will disappear."

His mother, too, cared about babies, though she could no longer have them. Her last few had come out twisted, his oldest cousin, Eli, claimed: deformed and pale, whiter even than Tem. Maybe they'd gone to *Morton's*, his cousin said, making the name sound filthy. Maybe they were there now, all sitting in a row: Tem's true brothers and sisters. Maybe, his cousin suggested, Tem should go there too.

At night, Tem dreamed of caskets: gorgeous, capacious, with ample room for the rolling of bones. He began to build small models, stacking them next to his cardboard airplanes and cats, themselves relics of a fairytale past. He stole time to log onto the archival network via his father's

computer, gazing at pictures of the sprawling, grassy cemeteries in which these fantastic objects had once rested, his daydreams growing more vivid still. All that land for the dead – it seemed like a crime. Now the graves rose high: no space remained for them below.

Lying in the dark in the bed he shared with his cousins Silas and Asher, in the room he shared with the rest of the kids, Tem thought of a family he knew in Brixton's, one with no sound at all outside of their tomb. He had seen them often, when he visited the nineteenth floor: they all stood together before a cardboard fireplace, the children smiling mischievously while their parents posed behind them.

There was a girl, and then, at her shoulder, a boy, and then, rising just to the height of her knee, a baby, its arms outstretched and mouth wide, as if preparing to take a step. Tem wondered why they'd chosen to stand it on its own two feet, and how the family had died. The bodies could have been added to the tomb over a period of years, but they all looked too young for that, and none of them looked sad, which Tem thought you would be if you lost one of the four people in the world you loved most.

"How did they die?" he had asked his mother's youngest sister, Edie, who sometimes told Tem the stories of the bodies in Brixton's vaults. Edie slept in a room with all the other adults, but Tem often heard her standing out in the concrete yard of the apartment complex at night, listening to the portable radio she'd kept out of the hands of the recycling plant. The same station from Estkos, the megalopolis on the Atlantic and the only remaining center of power in the Coalition, always filtered up to Tem's tiny window: women's voices, talking about a storm that had drowned three dozen schools of children in Féle; an illness that felled half of Balmor; explosions and ensuing riots that claimed tens of thousands of lives in Nuyok. Tem squirmed as he heard these stories, but could not stop himself from listening, straining to hear the static-clouded voices over his cousins' snores.

"Can't say for sure. A lot of people took their own lives, after Perestroika II." Edie pronounced the numeral as "di-vah", from the language of a country Tem knew had disappeared long ago:

the plan for restructuring had a different, official name once, but no one could remember what it was. "Could be they swallowed poison, gave it to the kids. Wouldn't be unusual."

Tem looked at the smiling face of the girl, who did not look as though she had minded drinking poison. If he had to die to become like the dead, he thought, that was the way he would choose to go.

Silas turned over in his sleep, snorting into Tem's ear, bringing him out of his nocturnal visit to Brixton's. The family on nineteen had the most children of any family in the mortuary, he realized. He didn't know where the other children were, the ones who died in accidents or fires, who never could have stood in Brixton's next to the quiet, contented dead.

Tem closed his eyes, resolving to ask his aunt, Edie, alone of the adults Tem knew, might tell him the truth. But the next morning when he awoke, he had forgotten the question completely.

Over time, Tem's visits to the mortuaries grew fewer and fewer.

No one would take him down Lykeaway anymore. What had been an endearing focus in childhood was now freakish; Tem, having lengthened into a lanky, pale-skinned adolescent of seventeen, was no longer considered an innocent. His mother didn't understand Tem's long silences, or odd daydreams, or his insistence on scribbling doodles on cardboard that would only end up at the recycling plant.

"You're just like Edie, and look where she ended up," she admonished him. "Do you really think anyone wants to look at anything you make, Tem? It's all been done. Why waste the time?"

Time. Everyone felt it: everyone knew. They didn't have much time left. The news from Estkos grew worse by the day, with stories of catastrophic storms and conflagrations, ones the overloaded city had no resources to fight. Critical mass, it was whispered, had been reached: the time when there were too many people on the planet, when there was simply no more space to live and breathe, much less eat, shit, and sleep. If Estkos went, the survivors would spill inland, filling every inch of earth until they reached the desert ruins of Calirado.

At school, the kids busted each others' lips and spat blood at the teachers, pissed on the shoe-stamped grime of the stairs so that it dribbled down the steps, stampeded from the cafeteria hall, yelling and biting and bruising. The horde had suffocated three girls and a boy the month before, trampling them after something unknown sent the crowd running, pressing the teenagers into a lethal bottleneck at the doors of the hall.

Tem had been out of harm's way when the mass started to roil, and had stayed still, watching the writhing tangle of kids burst into the yard, then the teachers, who ran in to begin dragging corpses from the pile. "They'll go to Brixton's," he said aloud.

"Not him." A ponytailed girl beside him was nodding at a boy whose gray eyes were open wide, his tawny hair now dark with fluids, the side of his skull a mess of pulp. "He'll go to Morton's for sure."

"Morton's? Why?"

The girl's pudgy face was smeared with sweat; she had pin-balled between the verge of the mob and the walls of the cafeteria during the stampede, her panic saving her from a fatal plunge into the swarm.

"My brother went to Morton's." Her pale eyes, veined through with pink, slid from the dead boy's to Tem's. "We never visit him."

When they received word that fresh fires were consuming Estkos, Tem's father stopped eating.

Tem was the first to notice; he and his father were always the quietest people in the room, and observed more than most. Perhaps this solidarity made Tem reluctant to betray his father's secret, for he did not speak up as his father passed on the gummy tray of noot without taking his share, or secreted a square away beneath the table, replacing it on the tray as everyone began to clear away the remnants of the meal.

Tem's father spent his days logging orders for the manure trade into the family's computer, which was the only reason they hadn't been forced to turn it in to the plant. His mother had once hoped to save lives, as a doctor. She now drove a truck that sucked the waste from com-

munal outhouses when they filled to the brim, and delivered it for disposal at the plant. Tem did not know what, if anything, his father had dreamed of becoming; with his papery skin and thinning hair, he looked like a ghost thrown in among the living, weary of their company, ready to fade from their noisy world.

Tem watched as his father grew thinner and paler over the next month, until one day he stood from the table, a jellied square still clutched in his palm, and began to shake. Tem jumped from his seat to help him; it was not until his father plummeted, skull hitting the tabletop with a sharp crack, that the rest of the kitchen turned.

"Zach!" his mother cried, diving for the body. Tem knew somehow that even if his father was not dead yet, he would be within the day. He'd seen enough corpses to know.

His father died in the back of his mother's shit-glugging truck, expiring soundlessly as she rushed him to the plant for emergency care. There was no guarantee they would have treated him if she had made it: spouses of workers who served the city were entitled to limited care, but were hardly a priority. The only other option was the hoschurch, with its faith healers and rusty machines – more likely to catch a disease there than be cured of one, Tem's mother used to say.

It cost the plant less to promise a Brixton's burial if a worker's spouse died: spaces in the mortuary were limited, however, so this policy was first-come, first-served. "Might be the first lucky break Zach got in his life," his uncle David had muttered as Tem left the kitchen where the adults all sat in the dark, waiting for his mother to return. Tem, who had stayed with them until his mother's call from the plant, could not bear the vigil any longer. Though he was no longer a child, he did not know the correct way to behave, and longed for the blamelessness of sleep.

He awoke a few hours later to the sound of shouting in the kitchen, and stumbled out to discover his mother, her face twisted, her mouth contorting as she raged at his aunts and uncles. He could not understand at first what she was saying, so mangled was her speech, so strange the sentiment—

"I told them where I wanted him, and if it

costs me, then it costs me, and if it costs you, fine, because I'm what this family lives off of, I'm the one who brings home the noot, I'm the one who feeds all of your kids when I only have—" She stopped, sighting her son. "Tem. Go back to bed. This isn't a discussion for you."

"He should get a say, Esther." David stepped forward. "It's his father, after all. It's him they'll all talk about."

"Talk," his mother spat, her hair looped wildly around her face. "Talk means nothing. Bodies mean everything. Zach's still got a body, and there's only one place in this godforsaken town that understands why that matters."

"Esther."

"He's going to Morton's. It's done." The dark bags beneath his mother's eyes came into sharp relief under the kitchen's harsh light as she sank into the hard chair beneath her. "It's done."

"We won't stay," warned David. "Not if you do this."

His mother barked out a laugh. "Oh, really? Where would you go? Where do you think you'll find this kind of space?"

"I don't know," Tem's uncle replied. "But I won't have my children living under the roof of a madwoman."

He turned, taking his wife by the arm. Tem's mother called after him. "Better a madwoman's roof than no roof at all, Dave! All the roofs are caving in. We've got to take what shelter we can get."

Within the week, Tem's relatives kept their promise, leaving Tem and his mother alone, in an obscene amount of vacant space. At first Tem walked around the three rooms of the apartment with exhilaration, but the empty bunks and chairs soon weighed him down: if the authorities found out they had spare room, they'd resettle strangers in the apartment with them, or move Tem and his mother elsewhere.

What Tem worried about most, however, was the way his relatives had departed. They had tried to take him with them, but his mother had bellowed until they gave up their half-hearted fight. Now that she'd secured him, though, she wanted little to do with Tem: she spent her time at the apartment in bed, or sitting in the kitchen, staring at the painted wine bottle adorning the

table, its garish pink and green flowers chipped and misshapen.

He did not know if his mother still had a job. She left the apartment for long stretches of time at odd hours, never explaining her disappearance, and came back late, smelling of an antiseptic Tem could not identify. During her absences, Tem turned Edie's forbidden radio on full blast. His aunt had given it to him before she'd left for the coast, telling him she had to go, despite all of the warnings. "People here don't know how bad it is," she'd said. "They're all still pretending. They've got their noot, and they can see the sky, and they can make believe the mortuaries are something great, instead of a monument to everything that went wrong here. I'm going to change things. I'm going to help save Estkos, because if Estkos goes – we all do."

The old station from Estkos no longer worked, so Tem gleaned bits of news from the other channels, ignoring the official reports and classical music, focusing on the fuzzy pirate stations. He was listening one evening when a female voice, not so different from Edie's, stilled his finger: "... the fall of the city. Communication with Estkos has been severed, and no help is forthcoming. Fires and storms have pushed astronomical numbers of people out of Estkos, flooding the inland cities with caravans of survivors. They've come by car, by motorbike, and by foot, but as the waves continue, all remaining population centers will be inundated by new, insupportable masses of the displaced, exacerbating the unstable conditions already faced in the Lakelands, New Bayannur, and Los Monjes, which have all experienced noot shortages and frequent wildfires in recent months. With water scarce and resources badly strained, the safest place to hide may be underground."

Or far above it, Tem thought. He needed to warn his mother, to form a plan – but if his hunch was right, she was already in the safest place in Andersenville.

He took the bus to school the next day, but got off a stop ahead of his usual one on the way back, heading from the center of town to Lykeway, the long road to Morton's. The man from so many years ago was still there, wearing his red tie and rumpled black suit, ill fitting over the lump of

his torso.

He grinned as Tem approached, the same conspiratorial grin that used to redden Tem's cheeks. "Looking for something?"

"Can I take a look inside?"

The mortician shifted off his stool. "Can you ever. As long as you like. What's your name, kid?" "Tem."

"Tem. Well, Tem, my name is Maxwell Brixton." Tem accepted the man's ursine hand, his fingers vanishing within its warm grip. "Son of the infamous H.G. You can call me Morton, though – everybody does. This your first time here?"

"I've been to Brixton's, but here, yes."

Morton grinned again. "Then we gotta give you the grand tour."

To enter Brixton's, Tem had always taken an elevator up and made his way down the tower. In Morton's, they went from the bottom to top, climbing a narrow stairway that opened into a grand, faded foyer.

Tem gaped up at the dim sunlight filtering down from twenty floors above: the center of Morton's was open, with once-gilded balconies rising to its smudgy glass ceiling. Before them stood a fountain, its water gray, though still running, with stone benches at its corner.

The man gestured to one of the benches. "The first graves at Morton's. We built this mortuary on a cemetery. Lutheran, I think it was. They took away the markers, but the bodies are still there."

Tem felt the cold seeping up from the marble floor, and wrapped his bare arms around himself, nodding up at the balconies. "Why is it all open? I mean – why isn't it like Brixton's?"

The man raised a shaggy eyebrow. "No one ever told you?"

Tem tightened his arms, defensively. "Told me what?"

"This place doesn't have a thing to do with Brixton's, kid. I was born a Brixton, but I won't die one. They wouldn't have me, and good riddance to 'em. They may have claimed Pops's body for their freak show, but they'll never get mine."

He began walking toward the archways lining the open foyer. "It's just me here. No attendants, like at the big blue shithole next door. I've got

some automatons to help out, but I do all the platination myself, and this place runs like a dream." He thumped his fist against the wall of the arch. "Dad built this place to last."

They came to another stairway, wide and dimly lit, twisting out of sight. The mortician flourished his hand toward the entrance. "Elevator's been down six months. After you."

The stairs creaked as they ascended, the frayed carpet scratching at Tem's shoes. The man was following behind him, too closely: Tem stopped short. "My father died. That's why I came. I mean – part of it."

"My condolences." Morton was close enough that Tem could see his pores, and didn't look sorry at all.

Tem took a breath. "A boy in my class died, too. I saw it. But I don't know if... He was in bad shape. He may not be on display."

The man chewed his lip. "Came in a month or two ago?" Tem nodded. "Come with me, kid." Morton sidled past Tem, his stomach brushing the younger man's hip. "I think I know the one you mean."

They passed a few floors before emerging onto the fifth. Morton trundled along before him, leading Tem past closed vaults until they stopped before a tomb at the end of the hall, its crimson doors adorned with gold fleur-de-lis.

Morton turned to face Tem, his bulk blocking the tomb's entrance. "I'm surprised you came by without knowing what was in here, kid. We don't get many unexpected visitors, not down here, and of course we've got very strict guidelines for who can use the private vaults. I know all the regulars."

"Regulars? Why do they come here, and not to Brixton's?"

"We have a very open visitation policy."

"So does Brixton's. You can go there any time."

"No." Morton reached to his right, pressing a button next to the vault. "We have a very *open* visitation policy."

The red doors opened, but there was no glass. No pane separated Tem from the body, which stood alone, its gray eyes locked on his.

The boy's bloody clothes were gone, replaced by fresh cotton garments. They had washed his face, applying a preserving glaze to the wound

in his skull, perceptible only by the slight sheen to his exposed brains. He looked natural, for all that was wrong with his form, like he'd been born this way, still and whole, covered in the juices of the womb.

"Why didn't you—"

"Clean 'im up? Stamp the Brixton's seal of approval on his ass?" Morton leaned against the wall. "These poor bastards are past all that. The 'violent dead,' we call them. They who died screaming. Over there—" he jerked his finger toward the back wall, in the vague direction of Brixton's "—they need you to die pretty, or at least pretty enough that they can fix you up. They stitch open wounds and stuff cavities with rags, break bones to make 'em fit their poses — they taxidermy them, over there. That's no way to treat the dead. No way at all."

Tem walked up to the boy, whose mouth hung open, frozen in the expression with which he had died.

"You know him well?"

"No. Not at all." He reached out a hand. The boy's skin felt clammy and slick under the orange corpse-lamps. "Are they...are they all like this?"

"Nah, the residents up in the private rooms are whole — mostly. Those are the ones that get brought here by choice."

"People bring them here so they can — visit them? Without glass?"

"Without rules." Morton lowered his voice, though no one but the bullet-headed automations, gliding by to spritz the corpses with refreshing chemicals, were around to hear. "There's a man who's been coming in every week for seven years to eat a piece of his wife. Keeps him young, he says, and she agreed to it, though the family didn't. Died at thirty-one. Used to be quite the looker, she was. Now I suppose she'd still turn heads, and more than a few stomachs." He let the joke land, then guffawed at his own punch line.

"And the ones here? The... 'violent' ones? Do people—"

"No, we've got more restrictions down here. I can't be everywhere at once, of course, so it's hard to say nothing ever happens. We used to rent these ones out, back in the old days — for birthday parties, concerts, you name it — but the fourth or fifth round of Perestroika reforms put

a stop to all that. Guess they kept the world from falling apart, for a little while, but it sure made things less fun."

"But your dad — H.G. Brixton — he built this place? And Brixton's, too?"

"Twenty years apart. I was barely born when Brixton's rose, but I'd been living in Estkos, oh, three or four years by the time this place went up. His third wife died violently, y'see. Car wreck. He wanted to put her on display in Brixton's, but the rest of the family wouldn't let him. It was too big a brand by then. So he used all his money to build her somewhere new, somewhere he could sleep by her side, hold her hand. He said we'd been short-sighted. Here he'd perfected this amazing thing, this way to preserve bodies so they won't decay, and we were using it to — what? Build a museum? No, that was a waste. Why not let the living be with the dead, if the dead still felt like the living?"

"Her last name was Morton. First name Marj. Pops liked it for the place because he wanted to honor her, and because it was the name of some village his grandparents lived in back in England that's far underwater now. I just liked that it wasn't 'Brixton,' so when I came from Estkos and started helping to run the place, I let people start calling me 'Morton' too. Guess it stuck." He thumbed toward the door of the tomb, like a man eager to show off the treasures of his house. "Wanna see some more?"

Morton took Tem from vault to vault on the top floor of the violent dead, sponging the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief. The bodies here were broken, bloodied, limbs bent backwards, teeth splayed inwards, fingernails torn from hands, noses ripped from cartilage. Some of them could barely be called bodies at all: they came to one tomb that merely contained a raw, muscled stump with bits of tangled flesh hanging from its roots, propped upright only meters from where Tem and Morton stood.

Tem shuddered as he ran his eyes over its exposed husk, his every tendon twinging in sympathy. Morton steadied him, placing a solid hand on Tem's back. "You all right, kid?"

Tem swallowed. "What happened to...?"

"Her. It's a her."

"...Her?"

"Burned. Other things, too. The burning was the worst."

"But...why keep it? Why...why show this?"

Morton's fingers ghosted over Tem's spine. "I knew a man in Estkos who died like that. Burned, in the Nuyok explosions. Or maybe—" He nudged Tem to the right, towards another open vault: he'd revealed them all with a flourish when they'd come to the fifteenth floor, keying in a single code that opened every door. "Or maybe he was drowned, in the storms that came right after. Or trampled, like your friend. I don't know; I never saw the body."

He turned Tem to face him, his hands gripping Tem's shoulders. "It's better to know. Remember that, kid: *it's always better to know*. It's why I went to Estkos and left this shit-pit of a town behind, at least for a while. I wanted to see the corpse of this world as it rotted, or I thought I did. I wanted to see the end."

"And what did you see?"

Morton didn't reply. Standing face to face, Tem could feel the animal warmth of him, and longed, suddenly, to confirm that he was not like the things in the vaults: to bury his face in Morton's furred and flabby stomach, to sink into the body inches from his own, to press his tongue into all its red slicknesses. He shuddered, overcome by these strange visions; Morton took his hand, and led him through the hall, down the darkened stairs, to the basement of the mortuary, where, he said, they could find something to eat.

.....
No one remembered the dead in Estkos.

Used-up bodies tumbled into landfills, or burned in mass crematories, or crumbled to dust under the rain and sun. The few who could pay once had their bodies frozen, but as the states of things worsened the practice fell out of favor, the state-of-the-art facilities shuttered and cannibalized for their valuable parts. No one believed there would be a world to return to anymore in fifty, sixty, a hundred years; no one wanted to see what remained if there were.

After the city's frequent storms – the sudden, sky-shattering tempests that flooded the city's lower levels, filling the shelters of the indigent, kicking the city's routine mass migrations into high gear – bloated bodies lay in the streets for

weeks, turning black and bilious, until someone finally threw them on the trucks meant for retrieving the corpses of the fierce, feral dogs who had lived through the gassings of Perestroika. These dogs were used for noot: Edie had told Tem long ago how many people in Andersenville had slaughtered their pets and animals when she was a young girl, driving them off cliffs or breaking their necks rather than see them ground into jellied food.

"My aunt went to Estkos," Tem told Morton, as he described his time in the city on the coast. "She never came back."

"Most people don't."

They were sitting in the basement of the mortuary, in a small kitchen next to the white preparation tables and silver tube of the vacuum chamber, where Morton had prepared for Tem a meal of spring onion salad, with crab apple jam and dandelion wine for dessert. Morton grew his own food in a small garden on the tower's roof: Tem relished every bite, marveling at the textures, so different from the slimy sameness of noot.

Morton – "Max, in those days" – lived in Estkos for six years, making a living in the bathhouse district, pimping out boys fresh from the ruins of Texico or Calirado, in cracked-tile steam rooms where water never ran. He'd started out as one of those boys himself, telling men sad, invented stories of radiation and the quakes, but saw how quickly the boys around him grew worn, the circles around their eyes darkening, their cheeks caving and foreheads creasing until it became impossible for them to pose as 15- or even 25-year-olds. "So I became management – upped the rates, protected the boys, kept the clients in line. Guess I got something of the Brixton business sense, after all."

"Couldn't you have ended up in trouble? With all of those men, I mean?"

Morton laughed. "I was meaty enough to handle any of 'em, even back then. Now, you—" His eyes ran down Tem and back again. "You they'd have eaten alive."

Only one thing, it turned out, could throw a wrench into Morton's career plans. A man came to the bathhouses one day, advocating for the rights of the sex workers in Morton's care, with a

contract he demanded that Morton sign. "It was crazy to think that a piece of paper could mean anything to anybody, but I signed it anyway. I would have done anything for any man, woman, or automaton with that face."

The man's name was Eduardo, and he was a revolutionary, a major player in the movement to restore some integrity to the operation of Estkos, to provide medical care for victims of the plagues and demand accountability for the critical noot shortages and building collapses. Morton left the bathhouses the day Eduardo entered them, joining Ed's band of rovers, sleeping with a dozen squatters head to foot on concrete floors or slumped together on piles of rags, crammed in the crannies of abandoned lofts or narcopads.

He and Ed never fucked where they slept, but on rooftops, or on the rails of abandoned subway tunnels, where the waste lay too thick for any train to plow. They fucked in closets and alleyways, in junkyards and the husks of cars, behind high towers of noot bags in the black-market bazaars or down on the floor of hoschurches. Never were they alone, but they didn't care, and neither did most around them. On occasion, someone would hurl a bottle; sometimes a cop would give half-hearted chase, in the manner of someone trying to drive off a pigeon.

Tem took a sip of wine, disguising the tremble of his hand. He could picture Ed, just as Morton described him: slender and muscled, with black hair he wore buzzed and glasses he carried a repair kit for wherever he roamed, along with a straight razor and set of emergency candles, which he only lit in need but always decorated, winding bits of colorful trash around their bases, setting up small altars anywhere his band of *invasores* spent more than a few nights. Morton flashed into Tem's mind, too, looking only slightly more baby-faced as he pulled Ed close, enveloping him in pillowy skin that blocked out the sounds and smells of the shit-mired city.

They'd been together two years when the rioting began in Nuyok. "The situation there was the worst I'd seen: the district was fresh out of even the most basic noot, never mind the high-grade stuff, and kids were dropping like dogs. Combine that with the fact that half the district washed away every time it stormed, and you had

a powder keg rarin' to spark.

"Ed told me he had to go, that this was the moment: they were gonna push for something big, right in the worst of it. Said he'd get in and out, that I should stay put, and that he'd call – I'd picked up these old cell phones a long while ago from these two oil execs who had come slumming in the bathhouses to find a good time. Now, *that* was a fun night – but I guess that's not the story I'm telling."

Ed called Morton on the seventh day, from deep in the densest center of Nuyok. "He told me the violence was getting worse, and they'd be shutting down the transit lines soon. 'All right, Eddie,' I said. 'Take care of yourself. 'Stay safe, Max,' he told me. 'See you on the other side.'"

Morton stared at his own glass of amber wine, held in his fleshy fist. "Couple hours later, word came over nobody in Nuyok was getting out of there alive. There'd been a series of explosions, and fire was spreading fast, with all the layers of the old city going up like kindling. I still don't know – it could have been Ed himself that did it, just like they all said, though he was smarter than that – smarter, and better, even with how bad things were. It coulda been the cops, too, or it coulda been Coalition thugs. But there's no one around to say, because all that remained when the storms came was ash.

"I bartered passage out of Estkos, just like Ed had always told me to do, and went to wait in Brixton's, where we'd planned to meet and batten down the hatches if we needed to, survive off emergency noot and water. These towers are the tallest things around for miles – they'll be the first thing anyone comes for if things go bad, so Pops had ways of locking them down the first day they were built. If Ed could get here, we'd have half-a-chance of riding it out, even if the world fell to shit around us. But he couldn't. He didn't exist. The man was dust, somewhere, and the world was already done."

"But—" Tem's tongue struggled against his teeth. "But it isn't done. We've still got time. This might not be the end of the world. Not really."

"Worlds end all the time, kid. All these people's worlds—" Morton gestured towards the ceiling, towards the floors and floors of dead above them —"their worlds ended, often in fire and blood.

And you can bet they left behind others whose worlds ended then, too. The end of the world's different for everyone. I hope yours is far off, but the chances aren't looking good." He put a paw over Tem's hand, and Tem examined his eyes for the first time: liquid brown, with light red ashes, spider-webbed around with deeper cracks than Tem had first seen. "You can stay, though. If you want to, and you don't have anyone at home – and I could take one look at you, kid, and know that you don't – you can stay. I've already talked to some of the regulars, and they'll be waiting it out here too, if the worst happens. The safety of this place is wasted on me."

Tem pretended to examine his glass, aware of how young his next words would make him sound. "I do have someone, but she's not at home. I think she may be here, actually. With my father."

Morton released Tem's hand. "In here, huh?" He leaned back. "He look like you, your dad? But paunchier? Balding?"

"That sounds like him."

"Oh, he was an easy one." He grinned. "Nothing but a cut to the temple to patch up. It's art, with some of the harder ones, but you like a break every once in a while. When they come in whole, you know you'll actually be getting some sleep that night." Morton chugged his wine, then set his glass on the table, wiping his mouth as he glanced up at Tem. "Oh...sorry, kid. I get carried away. You live around corpses long enough you forget they're someone's people, sometimes."

"I don't know if he was my people. I didn't know him very well at all."

Morton pushed himself up from the table. "Well. You want to see him?"

They made their way to the twentieth floor, with Morton stopping occasionally to catch his breath. He led Tem to a vault with green and pink flowers painted on its door, their strokes looking far fresher than any of Morton's other decorations. "Your mother asked me if she could do that, if she got the paint herself. I said sure, but I don't know where in hell she found it. Must've had to make quite a trade." Morton rapped on the steel door with huge, hairy knuckles. For a moment they heard nothing, and then the panels began to creak and separate, released

by a button inside the vault.

His mother appeared by slits as the panels parted, looking as rested as Tem had ever seen her, with her curly hair pulled atop her head and no bags under her sharp, green eyes. "What do you—" She stopped, her gaze moving from Morton to Tem. "*Tem?* How did you get here?"

"On the bus. A few hours ago. I thought you might be here, with—" He caught a glimpse of the room behind her: the low ceilings; the gold and rose wallpaper, peeling onto ecru carpet; the soiled bed and rumpled sheets; the dead man laying atop them, his fish-blue eyes half-lidded, his bleach-white skin pickled and orange, in spots: an occasional effect of the 'corpsicle juice', as Morton called it, with which all bodies were treated. "With...Dad."

"I thought my *privacy* was supposed to be *respected*." She was speaking to Morton now, still blocking Tem's way into the tomb. "Why did you bring him here?"

"With all due respect, Ms Abulafia – he's the guy's son. I didn't think you'd mind."

"*I don't want him to see this.*" She looked at Tem. "Do you want to see this?" Tem hesitated, then shook his head: he'd seen enough. "All right, then. Is there somewhere we can go?"

"The vault at the end of the hall, I guess. On the right. No bodies in there, just odds and ends."

She stepped out of the tomb and seized Tem's wrist, pulling him towards the huge picture window at the end of the hallway and making a sharp right into the open vault Morton had indicated. Stacked furniture lined the walls, with discarded props from other vaults thrown under the small towers of couches and chairs. His mother extracted two plastic seats from the heap and set them in the room's center, indicating that Tem should sit.

Tem remained standing. He watched the muscles of his mother's neck tense as she clenched her jaw, preparing to speak. He didn't give her time: as she opened her mouth, he found questions tumbling from his. "Why are you here, Mom? Why is Dad here? Why didn't you come home?"

"You seemed to be doing just fine, Tem. I thought you might enjoy the time on your own. Didn't you always tell me that's what you wanted?"

"No. Not like that. I didn't know where you were, and there's bad news from Estkos. I thought maybe you already knew – that you'd come here to hole up."

"The fires?"

"The fires. And everything coming with them."

She sat down, folding her arms. "We've talked about it, the mortician and I. I hadn't decided what I'd do." Her fingers drummed her bicep. "I was going to come and get you, if I stayed."

Tem found, unsettlingly, that he didn't believe her. She was acting as she had the night his father died, with the same confusing energy, veering into realms of reason he didn't understand. "Okay. Fine. But you haven't answered my question, though. About Dad." He took a deep breath. "Did you put him in here because of my brothers and sisters?"

"What?"

Tem swallowed. "The children you tried to have, after me. Eli always told me – he said they'd all died. That they'd gone to Morton's."

"Eli." His mother laughed, throwing her head back and baring her teeth. Tem had only seen dogs on film, but his mother's laugh always reminded him of these creatures, of their wide-open mouths and resonant woofs. "The little *shit*. No, I never had any other kids, Tem. If you want the truth, I didn't want kids to begin with. It made no sense to bring anyone new into this world."

Tem had always thought his mother was obscuring facts from him, guarding secrets of adulthood that she didn't want to reveal. Now he suspected that he'd had it all wrong: maybe the only obstacle was that they had never been able to have a conversation without ten other people in the room. "So you and Dad – you didn't plan me?"

His mother's jaw softened. She waved again at the empty chair opposite her. This time, he accepted the seat. "I'm glad you're here, Tem. I'm sorry for you that this is the state we're all in, but I love you dearly, and in the end I'm glad you made it. But no, you weren't planned. It was a bottle of a wine, and a thousand lessons about overpopulation and prophylactics out of our heads." She sighed. "I was young. I never knew all the trouble a bottle of wine could bring."

"But if it wasn't what Eli said – why bring Dad here? Why not to Brixton's, or the crematorium? I thought you hated the mortuaries."

"Did I say that?" She ran her thumb absently over the silver band on her ring finger. "Maybe I did. But it wasn't a choice, not really. When they pulled him out of the truck and confirmed nothing could be done, that his heart had failed and all that was left to do was sign papers for the burial, I just did what I had to do. That's what living is, Tem. Thinking you're one person, until you have to act and discover that you're someone else entirely. It's what I've always warned you about, smart as you are. Thinking won't do you any good."

She readjusted, crossing her ankles. "You know your father and me never got a room to ourselves, not in all those years? Not even for a night. Maybe I wanted to make sure we got something like our reward, even if there's only one of us around to enjoy it." Her laugh echoed in the vault once again. "Though I wouldn't call this 'enjoyment', exactly."

"You think it's what Dad would have wanted?"

"All he wanted was out, Tem. I knew it. I don't resent him for it. He was never as strong as I was." Now her fingers worked faster at the silver ring on her hand, spinning it round and round. "I *did* hate him for it, when he was alive. Now there doesn't seem to be much point. He's gone. Edie's gone. At least I can see him, here. Edie – she's probably been dead for years, and I never knew. I just keep waiting for her to come back, like a fool. I keep thinking we'll all get more time, another chance at this. But we won't. This is it. And we ruined the world."

She was crying now, tearlessly, her mouth twisting as she tried to keep it in. "We were meant to be immortal, you know. By now – they told us it would have happened. I remember from my classes in school. I remember Ms Erlen telling us – by the time we were grown, we would live forever. She wouldn't, but we would. We were the future, then." His mother looked at him, her eyes a mess of unshed tears. "What are we now?"

Tem spent the night in an empty vault, in a bed twice the size of his own, with frilled turquoise covers reaching down to the carpet

and a princess canopy overhead. He didn't ask who it was for, all he knew was that they hadn't arrived yet, and wouldn't be kicking him out any time soon.

Morton had offered to let him sleep in the basement, where he kept his own bed, but warned Tem that it would be loud, as he'd be working on new arrivals most of the night. Tem gratefully took his second suggestion of the room on sixteen: it was silent, and Tem's body felt drained of all of its fluids, of its blood and tears and semen and bile. All he wanted was sleep.

He dreamed of Edie: of finding her, on every floor of the mortuary, wearing a different face, or no face at all. He found her as an old woman, skin purple and puckered; as a jaundiced man, eyes shot through with red; as a child, unmarked. He dreamed of Eduardo, who was Edie, even though neither of them looked the way they had when they were alive. He knew, though. He could find them anywhere.

The next morning, after rising in the dark, Tem walked back up to the twentieth floor, passing the closed door of his father's vault as he made his way to the window at the end of the hall. Plumes of smoke bloomed across the early morning sky, rising above a mass, still hazy, spilling over the horizon. They were coming, the survivors of Estkos. They were nearly here.

He didn't know how long he'd been standing there, mesmerized by the nearing miasma, when Morton padded up beside him, panting slightly as he came to stand beside Tem. "Thought I'd find you here. See what's coming in from the east?" Tem nodded. "Then that's it. We lock down, or let 'em in. There's no way to pick and choose – they'll all be flooding in too fast. We gotta act soon."

"Let them in." Tem's own voice, firm and fast, startled him. "I mean – if you're asking me. I think we should let them in."

"Doesn't give us much of a chance, kid. They'll overrun us in minutes."

"But who will give them a chance, if we don't? We can't help anyone if we lock them out. They'll think we're their enemies, and the tower will come down anyway, once they surround us." He looked at Morton, who was chewing his lip. "Isn't it what Eduardo would have done?"

Morton ceased his biting, slowly running a thumb over the puffy skin. "Doesn't matter what he would have done, kid. The truth is it's your world now. It's not mine, or his. Not anymore. If you want to open the doors, it's your funeral."

"Maybe if they see it – all the bodies – maybe they'll understand. Maybe they'll be peaceful. Maybe all they need to do is see."

Morton didn't give him the smile Tem hated: the smile of all the adults he had ever known; the smile that told him he knew nothing, that he couldn't possibly understand the things they'd seen. Morton gave him a smile, sad and genuine, that tugged at Tem's heart; Morton smiled like maybe Tem was right, but he couldn't let himself believe it. "Your call, kid. You've got the most to lose of any of us." He looked out toward the horizon. "I'm just here for the floorshow."

Tem thought of his father, who didn't stick around to see if the world was worth saving. He thought of Edie, maybe out there somewhere, traveling, impossibly, at the front of the herd, bringing help instead of destruction, the flames he saw from the tower a beacon, not a threat. He thought of his mother's hope, restored at the sight of her lost sister; he thought of Morton's vigil on the stool outside the mortuary doors, ended by Eduardo's return.

He reached for Morton's hand. Here, with the rows of the naked and the flayed beneath them, with the mortician's grip in his and the soured taste of wine still on his lips, with the morning sky stained with smoke and the useless breath in his lungs and the quivering muscle beneath his skin, Tem could almost grasp it: the lie at the heart of life. We're all pretending, he thought. We're all pretending we're more than meat, that we're doing something more than covering the world in meat and trash and noise. Yet pretending had always been more real to him than the world of flesh and dirt: if pretending was what it took to live, Tem knew he had the means. He wanted to live. He wanted to live as Edie had, as Eduardo had, as Morton and his mother had. He wanted to live, even if it meant he wound up dead.

"Open the doors. Let them in. Give them a chance."

So Tem and Morton stood with the dead, and waited for the living to come. ■

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3

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COLD TURKEY

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TTA NOVELLAS

3

Jimmy blinked up at him, his wide moonface uncharacteristically solemn. "It's okay, Mr Munroe. If you tell the truth you can't get into trouble."

Raym drew his weary and still shaky hand over his eyes and cheeks. "What?"
"I seen him."

"Saw," Raym corrected, and then he dropped his gaze, his heart starting up its unhelpful jack-hammering again. "What?"

"I saw him Mr Munroe." A sly look lit up Jimmy's blinking eyes. "He's *always* chasing you."

Raym's hand froze in front of his chest, creeping back up towards his throat again. "What?"

"In a funny square van." The kid blinked, blinked, blinked. He *wooshed* his hands either side of his body like he was starting a drag race, and Raym flinched again. "It's got black tails – really, really looong ones, like party streamers!"

"Part nightmare, part pitch black comedy, Johnstone's novella has a hallucinatory quality that keeps you guessing until the final reveal. *Cold Turkey* is genuinely chilling, an addictive mystery that will have readers turning pages until well after midnight. It is Johnstone's skill in characterisation and in the rendering of dialogue, however, that is most consistently mesmerising. Her sense of place is masterful, leaving you with the conviction that she doesn't just know these people, she cares about them, too. *Cold Turkey* must surely be Carole Johnstone's most confident and assured achievement to date and I loved reading it"

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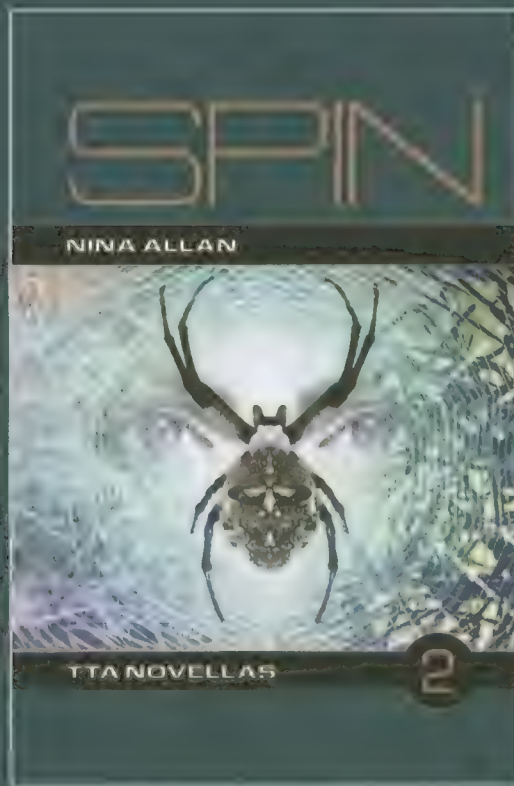
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DIVING INTO THE WRECK VAL NOLAN

1

Noon in La Jolla, on Voigt Drive, the university blistering beneath a July sun and the curled cinders of a thousand eucalyptus leaves crushed and crinkled underfoot. Overhead, Marine Corp F-22s stab at the sky in echelons and arrowheads. Students drift around the restaurant at Canyon Vista while high school kids in bright singlets troop in from the soccer camp on the arid fields beyond. The air is still and dry, thick like hot glass and an ever-present weight.



Arthur Byrne describes it to me from the bubble world of his air-conditioned rental car. I can hear the rustling of paper over the phone, the latest findings strewn around the front seat of his Toyota. It is supptime in Galway, Ireland. Cabbage and mash and a call from the astro-archaeology symposium some five-and-a-half thousand miles away.

"Arthur," I tell him, "I'm out of that game. You know this."

But an old friend like Art is not so easily dissuaded. While I retreated into programming and remote sensing, he became a field investigator. Orbital surveys of defunct satellites, season-long expeditions to the Lagrange Points; he knows the inner system like a lover's face while I still get lost on the way to my own office. Now he is on Earth again, in California at the annual gathering. Long days in lecture after lecture and long nights drinking on the burnt grass outside the speakers' rooms, I guess I should have been there too. But it's the same every year, is it not? Wrong, Arthur tells me, because now it seems that someone has found it: "The greatest lost relic of the Space Race," he says. "Untouched, preserved for the century and a half... Someone has finally found Apollo 11".

Though of course, we've all seen Apollo 11. We've all floated over the grey wastes and descended to the clear dome of Tranquillity Base. It's the stuff school trips are made of, interactive holograms and checklists under glass. We've all had the tour and been disappointed by the stubby little platform which remains, nothing but landing pads and empty fuel tanks. Where is the actual *Eagle*, the ascent stage? Where is the spacecraft that Armstrong and Aldrin flew? It is the question the guide is most often asked and he tells everyone, with near-superhuman patience, that after rendezvousing with the command module, *Eagle's* ascent stage was jettisoned into lunar orbit and impacted "at a still unknown location".

That was July 21st 1969, before the radar tracking of Apollo hardware was in practice and before the anomalies of lunar gravity had been fully mapped. For the last hundred and fifty years the ascent stage was a needle in a 38 million square kilometre haystack, a cratered,

mountainous dustscape the size of Asia; a surface which, despite lidar altimetry and satellite mapping, still remains less well charted than the valleys and plains of the Earth's ocean floors. Not that this stopped people looking, archaeologists in spacesuits circling the moon or peering down at the fines and regolith via orbital observatories controlled from Pasadena or Darmstadt or Tsukuba. A lot of people have spent their lives looking for that module, many of them good friends wasting away on one promising lead after another. Like Arthur is doing. Like Lena did, in her own backwards way.

There's something which lures them in, you know. Apollo; it has a magic to it, the aura of another age. We were obsessed with it, growing up on the boggy hillsides of west Limerick, in parishes which seemed forever stuck in some unrelenting twentieth century. Handmade and heroic, Apollo was of a piece with that young world. While the net buzzed constantly with new developments, fusion drives and radiation shielding, we weren't old enough to understand it all. Apollo was simpler, bolder; three men in a metal can slung from sphere to sphere. A good Irish name on one of them too: Michael Collins. Not the guerrilla in the grainy pictures but the man who stayed in orbit while the others made the landing. The most isolated human being there has ever been.

Of all of us, Arthur was the most taken with the Collins myth. I suppose he had to be, the way Lena and I formed a separate universe of our own. For years he devoted himself to Apollo's esoteric loneliness. He travelled all across the United States, to every site which manufactured components for the program. He oversaw studies of gravitational dynamics and orbital projections, led eager postgraduates in field trips across the rilles and wrinkle-ridges of the lunar surface. If *Eagle* was out there then he meant to find it, retrieve and restore it so it might inspire once again. For Arthur, you see, the study of Apollo was not just facts and figures. No, it was something more, an act of resurrection, an effort to recreate the pure optimism of that first real human embarkation to the stars.

Now, with the jet scream of Miramar booming across the sun-baked freeway, Arthur is babbling

down the line about coordinates and magnetic signatures. His voice is wild, an echo of the dark wind threatening my windows here in Galway. Perhaps that's why I half expected Arthur to be despondent, the prize of his life's search found by someone else.

"But you don't get it," he says. "This is brilliant. They might have it marked on a map, but someone still has to go up there and bring it back."

I'm stunned. If someone discovers it, if someone—

"I'm going," Arthur says, "I'm going up there to find it and I'm asking you to come with me."

2

Apollo. God of light and of the sun, of truth and prophecy and medicine, music and poetry and art. A name with attractive connotations for the greatest human undertaking of the day, a name with *power*. I consider its implications on my flight along the coast of Africa, south from Ireland to rich little Gabon where the elevator touches down. As the plane banks over the ocean I can see it, a single stroke from Earth to sky, thin as a hair, with multistorey cars racing up and down like the chariots of the God himself. I meet Arthur, fresh from California, in the terminal lounge. Yes, Apollo. Call and even I will still come running.

We had grown up together, Arthur Byrne and I. His father was a farmer, a steward of cruel land who had resisted the convenience of twenty-first century technologies. Old Denis Byrne had looked only to the past and it had held him back. His patchwork hills were just not viable and had not been for generations. I remember once he caught us playing with a model spacecraft, a battered old Shuttle or an Orion we had built out of a kit. The old man couldn't stomach it, his own boy tempted by the stars. I can still hear him ranting as he tried to wrest the spacecraft out of Arthur's hands. But Art was always quick, or at least he was before so much time away from Earth. Together we raced into the high fields and buried the model deep inside a wyne of hay. Though of course we lost it all the same. Like animals with a trinket or a morsel of food, we

soon forgot where it was that we had hidden it.

Years later, once we had left for university, it became rare for Art to ever see his father. Yet he was the old man's son whether he chose to admit it or not, and he too was fascinated by what had come before, by the history of a future which by then was playing out around us. His doctoral work was little more than an extension of the games we'd played as children, writing reconstructions of the early missions to be used in classrooms. Immersive holographic learning through which students could insert themselves into the story, play the part of engineer or astronaut. But by then Arthur too was playing a part. It was Lena who first noticed it, the gradual transition from academic to aesthete. She was already sick at that point but we got married anyway, and while Arthur was off retrieving Saturn upper stages from solar orbits and refurbishing them for exhibition, we were honeymooning down in Venezuela. That was our life from there on out: Earthbound, relinquishing the sky to Art as micro- or zero-gravity only worsened Lena's illness.

Then, the Taurus-Littrow incident on the edge of the Sea of Serenity. Arthur convinced UNESCO to open up the Apollo 17 site. He had the notion of returning it to Earth. Not just *Challenger's* descent stage or the Moon buggy, but the entire valley, every rock and boulder, every abrasive kilogram of lunar dust hoovered up, shipped down the elevator and recreated on the homeworld. There was talk of Nevada as its destination, out in the desert beneath a dome which would mirror that constructed at Tranquillity. An outrageous project, but then authenticity has always meant everything to Art. It took him years to piece together all the funding but the accident raised questions, four members of his team killed in the crash of a support craft. Blameless Arthur could only watch as the investigation dragged on. Twenty-two months of interviews and inquests, nearly two whole years of bad publicity. Quietly the investors began to disengage.

Arthur lapsed into his more obsessive tendencies after that, my best friend retreating into sims and archives, though I didn't even notice. Those were the years of Lena's final decline, her own

body having turned against her. Muscle atrophy not unlike that suffered by the early space travelers; inability to chew or swallow, eventually to breathe on her own. She died of complications from a respiratory infection, at home, in the early hours of a summer morning, her immune system too weak to fight it off. In the final months she had refused all treatment. Nothing I said could change her mind and the only thing that mattered was finishing her book, that massive study of astronauts in the popular imagination. Hers was the flipside of Arthur's solitary inquiry. Apollo; it had taken the pair of them and left me alone in a barren, sterile world. A dead place without Lena's love or Arthur's company, a thin layer of fine grey dust settling on every mark and scar and memory. My own private Moon.

3

The Earth falls away beneath us, a brief shock of g as the survey capsule fires its engines. I have loved and feared trans-lunar injection all my life, the moment when one leaves the prudent gravity of home and embraces the promise and the peril of space. The moment when anything can happen.

"I never thanked you," I tell Art. "Not properly." "Hmmm?"

"After Lena died—"

He looks up from his instruments.

"—I thought I was on my own."

"Yes, well," he says, and moments pass.

After the service for Lena I spent numb weeks alone in our apartment. The university called it compassionate leave but it was a collapse, pure and simple; concentrated, vertiginous grief of a degree for which I had no frame of reference. I was drawn to the places which were hers: the armchair beneath the lamp in the corner of the living room, the worn leather sofa beneath the shelves in the study.

Of all things it was her book which roused me, ghost of her enthusiastic self. It was months before I could open up her database but when I did I found it waiting. Her last request had been that I shepherd the manuscript through to publication. I had been avoiding that, not out of

cowardice but because I knew it would be the last thing we would do together. Yet even when I did begin I had no idea what to do. The introduction crippled me anew, a tyranny of blank screens which dragged on for months. In desperation I had the house AI synthesise a composite introduction from a hundred different monographs and festschrifts, a kind of Frankenstein document from which I hoped to glean patterns or elements or some kind of inspiration to overcome my block, but still nothing; nothing could do justice to how I felt about her.

That was when Arthur re-entered my world, arriving at my door one October morning.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I missed the service."

He had been off-planet, he told me, wielding a cane with a knuckle of Armalcolite embellishing its grip as he had not yet restored his muscles fully. His presence was a jolt; it woke up memories of lying on the hillsides of home and pointing out the constellations, of lunches and endless teas in college commissaries, of the first and last time he tried to set me up with a girl. Lena; her empty chair between us in the living room, neither of us wanting to sit in it. We talked all night about her. Her enormous smile and the way she doubled over when she laughed; how she would stare at you through her big, awkward glasses when she was drunk; the fact that she was smarter than Art and I combined.

That was how I decided on the intro to her book, a conversation between Arthur and myself, her husband and her oldest friend. An expert in the person and an expert in the field, we cast the best times of our lives into words which would endure. It was a dialogue with an unspoken presence, Lena herself, an absence in the heart of the text who, though always present, could never be addressed.

"Hey," Arthur says, his hand on my shoulder. Somehow I had nodded off, weightless in the cabin's womb of straps and harnesses and blinking lights.

"Where are we?" I ask, but the answer is clear from the grey, impacted hemisphere which looms ahead of us, its fiercely lit mountain peaks bright like negatives of their own black shadows. And then, as it swells closer again, the ever-present handiwork of man: mobile mining rigs to

strip the foothill regolith of volatiles, radio towers, domed craters housing thousands, the glint of life from the skylights of lava tube laboratories and the strobe of marker posts designating hard packed highways across the dusty surface.

Here so the long culmination of selenological time.

The endless footprints of humanity.

4

All day we circle above the Ocean of Storms, not a body of water but a basaltic plain, a vast and ancient lunar blemish once thought to be the harbinger of tumult, inclemency, and poor fortune on the waves of Earth. Curious how those who worked the sea could ascribe such power to a desert. Or perhaps it isn't; maybe similar superstitions take hold among the inhabitants of Copernicus or Aristarchus when they look up through their domes and see the bright blue waters sparkling above them, the dust and the oceans linked forever in the minds of men? I have been to neither of those cities, two great settlements terraced inside the impact basins of Procellarum, and so I cannot say.

Lena would have gone of course, had things been different, and Arthur surely has been there, dragging himself noisily along the velcroed sidewalks from the assay office to the breaker's yard to any other nook or module which might have held the secrets of Apollo.

And what will I do if we really find it, that wreck of dreams, that race memory of metal? Palm pressed to the cool glass of the observation bubble, I tell myself that it's impossible to guess. A lie of course; I know exactly why I've come here.

"The point of it is mystery," Lena told me once. It was a winter's night perhaps a year after we were married. We sat across from each other at the table while the articulated limbs of the autochef gathered up our empty dishes. She was still herself back then. Warm. Lively. I remember the look of absolute certainty on her face as she gesticulated wildly, causing the apartment's slender robot to swerve and duck.

"Look at it up there," she went on, sweeping

the fork towards the window and the cold moon which dipped low above the bay. I could see the glint of lunar settlements spread across its face and, closer to home, the running lights of shuttles darting back and forth along the coast.

"Everyone talks about politics, about the Cold War and the Space Race," Lena was saying, "but *in spite of that*, on a deeper, fundamental level we just wanted to know what was up there, you know?"

"I know."

She smiled. "The point of the book isn't just how astronauts are portrayed, it's what they represent *for us*. It's trying to understand why they have such a hold on our imagination, about why we bother to tell their stories at all."

"The mystery of mystery?"

"You're an ass," Lena laughed. "You and Art both."

It was a point between them, the role of the space archaeologist.

"If Arthur has his way," she said, "there'll be no mysteries anymore."

"There's barely any now though, is there? Really?" I poured more wine in her glass and then in mine. "There's a few hundred tonnes of misplaced scrap whirling around the inner system—"

"It's the *idea* of it," she said. She closed her eyes as she sipped her drink. "The notion that there are things we don't know from only a century and a half ago. Frontierism ought to have its mysteries, don't you agree? Roanoke Colony, the Franklin expedition, Dasein's landing? It's an impetus for others to explore."

"You're contradicting yourself." I leaned forward, one elbow on the glass table, my head resting on that hand. "Surely the point of exploration is to find answers."

"Ah, but they're not real answers to be found. They're sigils, they're myths. The early settlers of America, the polar explorers and the Martian colonists? All of them made their own mythologies. Foundational texts wrought from things they could not understand. Things which, frankly, were downright impossible."

"Like not knowing where a crucial part of Apollo 11 is?"

"Exactly. That kind of mystery; that's a driving

force. Honestly, I hope we never find it. It would hurt, I think. It would hurt a lot of things. The mystique of the twentieth century, the reputations of the pioneers—”

“The place of astronauts in the popular imagination?” I smiled.

“You *are* an ass,” she said. “But I love you all the same.” Reaching across the table she took my free hand in her own and squeezed it gently.

“Contact,” Arthur says.

I look across at him, the cabin restraints suddenly tight against my chest. There’s a hint of gravity, just for a moment, as his fingers move in complex patterns over the sensors and the little ship responds with thrusters to reduce our speed.

Arthur taps the screen between us, magnifies the image, and there it is: *Eagle*, resting on its side, almost unrecognisable. Without the gold skirt of the descent stage discarded at Tranquility, the lander is hard to describe. A grey module buried so deep in the lunar dust that it’s no wonder satellite lenses could not resolve it. What’s visible is awkward and boxy, its shape not anything there has ever been a word for. I have seen realistic fabs and mock-ups, even 14’s recovered *Antares* floating in the Smithsonian, but still the size of it astounds me: so small! Room enough for two men just to stand; only barely room for them to sleep. An airy matchbox anchored onto tanks and thrusters and a cowed equipment bay that’s been crushed by the force of impact.

“Gently...”

I look at Arthur but he is not talking to me. He is coaxing our own little craft towards the surface, down to a rendezvous with, what? History? Destiny? I cringe at words like that but it’s true, Arthur has been waiting his whole life for today. He’s invested as much effort into finding this as Lena did into hoping it stayed lost.

It seems impossible, but I’ve never had to choose between them until now.

5

Arthur is in the rear airlock, cycling through to the lunar surface. Beyond the viewing blister, the misshapen, half-buried *Eagle* waits stubbornly

as it has for fifteen decades.

“This is wrong,” I say, thumbing open the secure channel between the cabin and his headset. “What are we going to get out of this? Another museum piece, another hunk of old hardware functionally identical to half a dozen others?”

“It’s the first one,” he says, the helmet microphone adding a scratchy sound to his voice. His tone is as though he is speaking to a child. “Man’s desire to see what’s out there moulded into metal, literally made real. It’s like the Wright Flyer. Or *Glamorous Glennis*—”

“It’s like the *Marie Celeste*, Art. We shouldn’t be here.”

“I get it,” he says, his white suit lumbering into view outside with that strange gait of everyone who has ever visited this little grey world. “But, there’s a reason I wanted you along. It’s the least I can do for her; to honour her. She should be here to see this but she’s not.”

“It’d break her to see this. Which just goes to prove that *no*, you don’t get it. You think in terms of things, Arthur, of objects with trajectories you can calculate. Desires moulded into metal? Lena never cared about the matter, she cared about the idea.”

I can see him outside, taking measurements and photographs. Confirming the find. “What do you want me to do?” he asks, raising his sun visor. He is looking straight in at me through the cockpit glass.

“Bury it,” I say, thinking fast. “Like we did with the model in the haystack. Only this time we direct the ship’s thrusters at the surface. You saw the dust they sent up during landing. We turn them on full belt and they’ll throw up a cloud big enough to bury the module. We can tell the Archaeological Council there’s nothing here, that their calculations were wrong.”

“Don’t be an eejit.”

I smile; that takes me back. An odd thrill to be chastised in such a childish Irish idiom again.

“The ship’s already recorded everything,” he says, poised before the derelict *Eagle* like Armstrong or Aldrin, had things worked out differently.

“I’ve spent my life writing the kind of software that runs these sensors. I can make them forget. This can work.” My fingers are already moving

across the controls. It's been years since I've flown a spacecraft but the interface is so intuitive it hardly matters. With the engines still warm, start-up takes only seconds.

Beyond the blister, Art bounces two steps towards me and stops. "What are you doing?" The screens monitoring his biorhythms all show elevated readings: heart-rate, breathing, adrenal levels... "This is idiotic," he says. "This won't bring her back."

"No," I say, "it won't. But it'll allow her life to keep its meaning." Gently I raise the ship from the surface of the *mare* and rotate it so the engine exhausts aim toward the wreckage. As I turn, Arthur falls out of view but I can still hear him on the radio.

"I'm not going anywhere," he says. "So do you intend burying me too, is that it? Turn me into another one of Lena's ghosts?"

"I'd rather not."

There is a burst of static, EM wash from the thruster assemblies. "...want to," Art says, "but

you're going to have to."

"Arthur, please move."

"No."

"I'm going to do this Arthur." My hand hovers over the touchpad marked INITIATE. "If you're buried under all that dust, your suit won't be able to radiate excess heat. You'll die."

"And how will you explain that?"

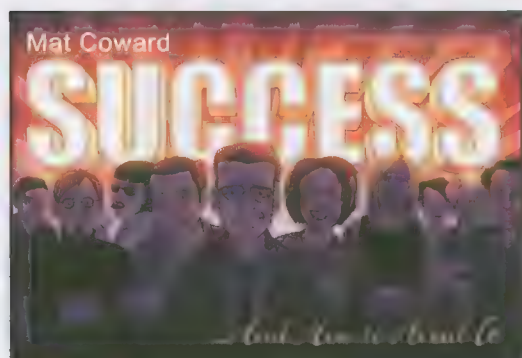
"Arthur, just move. Please?" Closing my eyes I can see Lena on the balcony in summertime, her back turned to me, her hair caught in the breeze.

Art says something but I've already touched the control.

His last words are the greatest mystery of all.

Val Nolan lectures on literature at National University of Ireland, Galway. A graduate of the Clarion Writers' Workshop (2009), his fiction has appeared in *Cosmos*, *Electric Velocipede*, *The Best Science Fiction and Fantasy of the Year* (Volume 8), and on the 'Futures' page of *Nature*. He is a regular book critic for the *Irish Examiner* and is a past winner of the Penguin Ireland Short Story Competition and the *Daily Telegraph* Travel Writing Contest.

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TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE

OLIVER BUCKRAM

GIRL MEETS BOY

The midnight ocean was as black and enigmatic as an unlabeled videocassette. You swam ashore and stumbled over jagged rocks towards my fire. I fed you marshmallows and dabbed ineffectually at your bloody feet with paper towels.

- (1) *Two truths and a lie* is a fun getting-to-know-you game, perfect for breaking the ice at corporate mixers.
- (2) I make three statements and you guess which one is false.
- (3) I love playing it.

DRAMATIC LIGHTING

The fire consisted of my ex-husband's clothes, the sheets he'd slept on, our glossy wedding album, all marinated in lighter fluid. I welcomed your company, however unexpected, and made s'mores. Soon your beard was speckled with graham cracker crumbs. We lay on the beach and admired the meteors streaking across the night sky in surprising colors: legal pad yellow, candy heart pink, gas burner blue. The Perseid meteor shower had never been so vivid.

- (1) We made love on my striped beach towel.
- (2) There are 51 weeks in a year.
- (3) I was on the rebound.

CLUES THAT A NEW BOYFRIEND IS NOT NECESSARILY HUMAN

You're anatomically correct, of that I am sure.

- (1) You had no photo ID.
- (2) When I kissed you, your face dissolved into a swarm of somnolent hornets, wafting languidly out to sea.
- (3) Your sweat smelled like almonds.

SEX ON THE BEACH, POTENTIAL OBSERVERS OF

Indifferent foxes with luminescent eyes. Tenure-craving extraterrestrial scientists using powerful infrared telescopes. An assembly of prurient ghosts who perished at sea.irate clams. In any event, the next day you moved into my apartment.

- (1) On the way home, you drove.
- (2) We stopped for gas.
- (3) I didn't see you drinking premium unleaded from the nozzle, nor licking your lips afterwards.

TIME'S ARROW

A physical law is said to be time reversal symmetric (T-symmetric) if it holds even when time runs in reverse. Newton's laws of motion are T-symmetric. Consider a pool table. After the cue ball hits the eight ball, we can run the video

in reverse and watch the eight ball hitting the cue ball. In idealized form, the green felt surface is a T-symmetric system, invariant to time reversal. Which ball rebounds off the other? Depends how we watch the video. Consider a meteor plunging to earth. If we run the video backward, we see molecules of atmospheric dust coalesce into a solid chunk of superheated rock that roars upward. It's improbable that molecules would arrange themselves thusly, but not impossible. Consider the success of the Apollo program. Consider the unlikely configuration of your own internal organs. Consider your pancreas, if you have one. Your pancreas: sinister, baroque, quivering even now, luxuriating in the unfathomable intricacy of its secretions. Are you certain you have one? Have you seen it?

- (1) The Perseid meteor shower occurs every August.
- (2) It's caused by Earth passing through debris left by the comet Swift-Tuttle.
- (3) Astronomers believe the comet's "dirty snowball" nucleus consists of ice, rock, frozen carbon monoxide, and a crystalline chamber wherein slumbers a race of beautiful men (nude, bearded, an assortment of ethnicities, smelling of cough drops and turpentine).

DIDO'S LAMENT AS A T-SYMMETRIC SYSTEM

After the fall of Troy, Aeneas fled to Carthage and became Queen Dido's lover. But the gods commanded Aeneas to abandon his new love and sail to Italy to become the progenitor of Rome. When he left, Dido became distraught and threw herself on a funeral pyre. From the deck of his ship, Aeneas saw flames on the distant shore. That's the traditional story. Now run the video backwards. Aeneas was navigating by starlight when he spied a burning woman on the beach. He hurried ashore to rescue her, pausing only to grab his fire extinguisher. Seeing a handsome stranger approaching, Dido leapt from her pyre, unharmed. They became lovers. Eventually his charms waned, so Dido banished him.

- (1) I was not troubled by the incident at the plan-

etarium.

- (2) During a thunderstorm, you climbed up one of the radio towers by the highway.
- (3) Your obsession with snowflakes was charming, at first.

I WISH I MAY, I WISH I MIGHT

Our yearlong attempt at cohabitation was unsuccessful. The ice cubes in the freezer turned grey and gritty. For 52 weeks you lived in my apartment, but you never mastered the kitchen's organization. I labeled everything with little yellow notes, but eventually they curled up and fell to the linoleum floor like autumn leaves.

- (1) I spent hours crying in the bathtub.
- (2) I never suspected you were alien/magical/imaginary.
- (3) You frequently ate baking soda.

PERPETUAL HATE AND MORTAL WARS PROCLAIM

Surprise! When he said "I'll love you forever" he really meant "until I move to Italy and marry a younger woman." What to do with the crap he left behind? To achieve proper closure, hurl his possessions into an inferno of cleansing flame. Next, declare endless war against any civilization he might establish. You'll roar with laughter when his new home is overrun by Carthaginian war elephants. Remember: If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out. Pluck that sucker right out. You'll feel good and look great! Consider your pancreas, if you haven't already. Has it offended thee lately?

- (1) While visiting the underworld, Aeneas (alive) encountered Dido (deceased).
- (2) She refused to look at him.
- (3) I'm sure this incident made her feel much better.

HOW DID DIDO DIE, DAD? SEASIDE SUICIDE — SO SAD

Aeneas eventually married an Italian princess and fathered a son, Silvius. One day, while look-

ing through a manila envelope of old photographs, Silvius discovered a snapshot of Dido and Aeneas laughing together and drinking Margaritas on the beach.

- (1) I have many close friends but you refused to meet them.
- (2) Your apology for breaking my snow globe was insufficiently sincere.
- (3) You failed to return astronomy books obtained using my library card.

PEACE AND I ARE STRANGERS GROWN

Consider the following scenario. A man consults the weather forecast and leaves his house carrying an umbrella. Later, it rains. Did the umbrella cause the rain? Of course not. If event A precedes event B, that doesn't imply that A causes B. The umbrella example illustrates the fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (a phrase from the civilization founded by Aeneas — thanks, Aeneas!). Consider a different scenario. Aeneas, after consulting the gods, deserts Dido. Later, she commits suicide. Did the desertion cause the suicide? Of course not.

- (1) The following August, we returned to the seaside.
- (2) At the peak of the Perseid meteor shower, we took a midnight stroll.
- (3) I had no hidden agenda.

AN ATTEMPT AT CLOSURE

You waded into the water and swam toward the place where the sea meets the sky. I sat on a rock and watched.

- (1) You never loved me.
- (2) I never loved you.
- (3) There are 52 weeks in a year.

Oliver Buckram, PhD, lives under an assumed name in the Boston area where he teaches social science to undergraduates. While he has many publications in academic journals, his unambiguously fictional work has appeared in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *F&SF*, *Shimmer*, and other places. He urges you to keep watching the skies.

A BRIEF LIGHT CLAIRE HUMPHREY

illustrated by Richard Wagner

Richard woke me by leaning across to shut the window over the bed. "Why the hell did you open that?" he said. "It's freezing in here."

I blinked my eyes open against the cashmere of his coat. "Wasn't me. Maybe it was Benjamin Livingston."

He shifted back, his tie trailing past my cheek. "Benjamin Livingston doesn't open windows."

"Does now," I mumbled, closing my eyes again.





"I've got to go. Presenting to a new account today," Richard said. "We're out of coffee."

"I'll pick some up," I said, huddling further into the duvet. Richard was right, it was freezing.

"I might be late," he said, as if that would be unusual. I heard the crisp snap of his watch-clasp, the rustle of a scarf as he draped it around his neck, the creak of the floorboards under his footsteps, receding.

Sliding back toward sleep, I thought I felt him kiss my cheek, a fresh touch of cold like he'd already been outdoors; it had been forever since he'd kissed me so sweetly.

That thought brought me wide awake, jolting up, hands to my face. I could see my breath. I was alone.

Across the doorway, just under the lintel, a pale bird floated. It always went a little too quickly for me to see, but the wings looked to be tipped with grey, like a seagull's, although it never made a cry.

"Benjamin," I said, grabbing the duvet and holding it up to my throat. "Come on, stop being creepy."

The bird didn't come back, but I still didn't know if he could watch invisibly, or if there were others like him about. I skipped my shower and changed beneath the duvet, struggling into jeans, a silk undershirt, a wool henley, a sweater.

"Well? I'm dressed now. You can come out," I said to Benjamin, but he didn't appear again. "I'm going to get some coffee," I continued, tossing back the covers, making for the front hall where my down vest and my purse hung.

Cold breath on my cheek, or maybe that was just the weather. I stepped outside and locked the door.

MY COFFEE SHOP WAS ONLY A COUPLE OF blocks away, on Ossington. I went there first, so that I wouldn't have been lying to Benjamin. I fumbled out some change to give to the homeless guy who always hung out in the nearby doorway. He had a couple of buddies with him today, all three of them grey with dirt and age, hands in ragged gloves wrapped around coffee cups, faces downturned over the warmth. The regular guy accepted a toonie and thanked me, but the other two didn't even reach out for the

money. Ghosts, or just not interested in charity? Whatever; I gave their share to my usual guy and hurried on into the warmth.

It was packed today. I got in line, and checked my phone. Nothing much in my inbox: a sale at Allsaints, an invite for a baby shower, a cancellation from the one client I'd had lined up today, a forward from my grandmother about her latest theory on the hauntings (most people went with "unfinished business", but Grandma seemed to like "dimensional portal"). No new Twitter mentions.

I fought with my conscience for about thirty seconds and then I gave up and called Jo. She picked up right away. "Pumpkin spice with whipped cream," she said. "I have a new one."

"Sideburns Dude has a buddy?" I said. Her ghost was an old white guy, very corporeal, unlike Benjamin. He usually just sat by the radiator, running his hands over an old book.

"Not exactly," Jo said. "You'll see when you get here."

JO WAS HANGING EXTRA DREAMCATCHERS IN all of her windows when I got to her apartment. I handed over her coffee, and sipped at mine, double soy latte with a sprinkle of nutmeg. "Do those things work on ghosts?"

Jo shrugged. "They work on white hippies," she said. "I just got an order for another hundred from that place in the Market. But come on, how many of us know shit about ghosts?"

"We know a lot more than we did a few weeks ago," I said, slipping out of my down vest. It was warm here. Jo was warm. I sat down right beside her, close enough for our thighs to brush.

She grinned, and laid her free hand on my knee. I held still and kept on talking. "I think I'm pretty much used to them already—"

A great big pelican flapped across the room, right in front of me. I flinched and yelped and slopped latte over my hand. The pelican turned into a woman, a middle-aged black woman with a long elegant build and hollow cheeks. She stood in the doorway to Jo's kitchenette and lifted her hands, beseeching, unbuttoned cuffs sliding down bony wrists.

"Whoa," I said.

"Guess the dreamcatchers are a bust," Jo said,

but she didn't move to take them back down. Sideburns Dude phased in just then, in his usual spot, head bent over this dark old book that might have been a Bible.

The woman in the doorway turned back into a pelican, and flew upward through the ceiling.

"Great. Now she's in my bedroom," Jo grouched. "I was hoping to take you up there."

"I think being haunted is kind of a mood-killer," I said shakily.

"There's always something," Jo said. "Fine. No, no, it's really fine. Give me a hug to hold me over until you can make up your damn mind."

So I straddled her sturdy lap and wrapped my hands into her coarse black hair and pressed my cheek against hers until the pelican flew in again, calling hoarsely with the force of its wings, and then I just clung to her, chills chasing up my back as I watched, over Jo's shoulder, the woman lifting her hands, the terrible grief in her eyes and the lines of her body.

"Come hang out at my place," I said, pulling away. "Richard's got a big presentation today, he won't be home until late."

"Your ghost is creepy," Jo said. "And freezing."

"We have lots of blankets—"

"From the bed you share with Richard," Jo said. "I haven't been doing this whole other-woman thing very long, but I'm pretty sure that's not cool."

I shook my head. "I'm being such an asshole."

"I'm not making it any easier," Jo said. "Come on, help me call around and see if the hotels are opening up at all yet. I don't want to stay here with this sad lady."

We booted up Jo's laptop and got on TripAdvisor, but the first seven hotels we called only had haunted rooms open.

"How about family?" I said. "I know your mom's gone, but..."

"So are my grandparents," Jo said. "Both my grandmothers died in the same year, right before we moved south. I have cousins in Wahnapiatae still, but I haven't talked to them in ages."

"How are we supposed to do this?" I said, the words coming out of my mouth before I realized I was going to speak. "When is it going to go back to normal?"

The pelican lady was opening all of Jo's cup-

boards, weeping silently as she failed to find whatever she was looking for.

Jo raised her eyebrows. "No offense, but you're not who I'm worried about here. I mean, look how *she's* feeling."

I didn't want to look. It seemed like an invasion. The lady was so distraught. Tears dripped from the point of her chin and vanished in the air. Strings of saliva stretched between her distorted lips.

"Do you know her name?" I asked.

Jo shook her head. "Haven't found anything online yet. Not going to stop looking, though."

My phone buzzed. I glanced at the screen. "Richard's mom," I said, wincing.

"Take it," Jo said.

"Mrs Montgomery?" I said.

"Thank God," Richard's mother said. "Richard wasn't picking up. Where are you?"

"Visiting a friend."

"I'm at your house."

"Oh," I said. "Richard didn't tell me you were coming today." I made a horrified face at Jo, who covered a smirk.

"I'm staying for a bit," Mrs Montgomery said, her autocratic voice weirdly harsh. "Martin has appeared."

"Oh. Oh," I said, which was totally inadequate, but what do you say at a time like that? "I'm on my way," I told her, and we hung up.

Jo was hesitating in the doorway of the kitchenette, right where the pelican lady had been standing.

"Richard's brother," I said. "Killed himself last year. His mom was the one who found the body."

Jo put a hand over her mouth, and came over to hug me. "Every time I think I hate Richard and his family," she said, "you tell me something that reminds me they're people, and then I hate myself for trying to take you away from them."

"It's not like that..." I said, shame pinkening my face.

"It is for me," Jo said, and she kissed my cheek and brought me my down vest. "Go look after her. We can talk later."

I would have kissed her back, but the pelican flew across again then, making that desolate sound.

MRS MONTGOMERY WAS WAITING IN A LIMOUSINE with the engine running. She'd been sitting there racking up the meter while I made my way back across town on the subway. Typical. She paid off the driver while I carried her bags in.

I had to close the bedroom window again, and the one in the guest room, too.

"The house is a bit cold, I'm afraid," I said, taking Mrs Montgomery's coat and handing her a chenille throw. "Benjamin Livingston's been at it all morning."

"Why do you call him that, Lauren?"

"He looks like Jonathan Livingston Seagull from the cover of the book. And this." I showed her the printout from the website, the only information I had found online. Benjamin Kendall, carriage painter, d. 1899, our address.

"But you don't know for sure," she said.

"No. And he doesn't tell us anything, he just appears and flies around, and sometimes he makes it cold."

Mrs Montgomery sat down hard on the sofa. "Martin appeared," she said, as if she had not told me before.

"Would you...like to talk about it?"

She motioned with her hands, flat and quick. "Some tea, please, if you don't mind."

So I made tea, and we watched Designer Guys and then a show about yoga, until finally Richard must have checked his voicemail and texted me to say he was coming home.

MRS MONTGOMERY SAID SHE DIDN'T NEED company, but Richard talked her into calling one of her book club friends who lived nearby. We waited until the friend arrived, made sure she knew how to use the coffee maker and not to be shocked by Benjamin, and then Richard and I got in the car.

We sat for a moment, Richard with his hand on the garage door opener, me with my hand on his knee.

"You don't have to go," I said finally.

"Unfinished business," he said. "What if it's with me?"

"Look, I'm sure he had some," I said. "People do. It doesn't mean it's your problem."

"My mother can't be in her house," Richard said. "You don't want her living with us forever,

do you?" He laughed, but it wasn't his usual charming laugh. He had trouble dropping the charm usually, even alone with me. That he couldn't summon it up right now was unsettling.

"I'm here for you, whatever you want to do," I said, which wasn't really what I wanted to say, but I had to get back somehow on the Good Wife side of the ledger in my own mind.

So Richard started the engine and we glided out through the lane and turned uptown toward his mother's house.

The sun had just set, but the city was bright, brighter than it had been before the hauntings began. More people were back in their homes now – for the first few days, Dundas Square had been a tent city of terrified refugees, while we all figured out what the ghosts were capable of – but everyone was sleeping with the lights on.

"The last time we talked, he called me Dick," Richard said. "Just to be mean."

"Was that right before Christmas?" We'd spent the holiday in California with my grandmother last year, only to come home early when Richard's mother called to give us the news.

"I gave him a package of sessions with a trainer, remember?" Richard said. "I thought he'd be happier if he was more active. He thought I was commenting on his weight."

I winced. I'd forgotten about that. "But that's not enough to count as unfinished business, surely? I mean, don't all brothers piss each other off sometimes?"

Richard shrugged. On the wheel, his hands were perfectly positioned, his platinum wedding band shining expensively; only the tight bloodless knuckles betrayed his tension.

"I never had any other brothers," he said.

THE MONTGOMERY HOUSE FELT COLD, ALMOST as cold as our place. I kept my vest on. We stepped carefully through the front hall. Richard's hand found the bank of light switches and flicked them all on. He did not pause to remove his brogues. He squared his shoulders and marched up the stairs. I followed.

At the top of the stairs he stopped and turned to me.

"You don't have to see this," he said.

We squeezed each other's hands. I had my

mouth open. I was going to keep following, I was. But he patted my shoulders and turned away.

I shifted from foot to foot. In my vest pocket, my phone was on vibrate, picking up a series of messages, thrumming against my ribs like my own trapped heart. I watched Richard pad down the plush carpeted hallway toward his brother's room.

He stood in the doorway. He said, "Martin..."

He didn't reach for the light, but I saw a flash from within the room, bright on Richard's face for a millisecond. Richard's shoulders flinched. His feet stayed rooted.

"You had to make it irrevocable, didn't you," he said. Not to me.

ON THE WAY BACK DOWN THE STAIRS RICHARD stumbled, just a little. His hand caught the railing, fingers whitening. He stopped. He looked back up the stairs.

"Martin always felt inferior," he said. His mouth twisted. "Now I think he was right."

Richard kicked at the newel, and continued down the stairs.

I ran after him, my shoulderblades pricking with my back to the top of the stairs and the open door up there. I caught up with him at the front entrance. He bulled through, didn't hold the door for me.

Outside, our car waited. Richard fumbled in his pockets. His breath kept catching. I took the keys from him, opened the door for him, went back to make sure the Montgomery house was locked up.

By the time I settled myself in the driver's seat, Richard had his professional face back on and his breathing was back to normal, but when I shut the door, he flinched. He watched me adjust the seat to my shorter legs and bring the steering wheel closer.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have said that. It wasn't...kind."

He didn't look at the house, but I did. The window of Martin's room looked out on the south side, and just before we pulled out, I saw the momentary flash again.

Somewhere around Spadina, Richard shivered once, full-body, and then he reached over and laid his hand on my knee. Usually it was me

doing that to him, while he was driving.

"We got the account," he said. "I forgot to tell you. The presentation went really well."

"Congratulations," I said, and maybe that was all the normal we could manage, because Richard didn't speak again.

NO ONE WANTED DINNER. MRS MONTGOMERY went to bed as soon as her book club friend had departed. Richard settled in his study with a bottle of scotch and a blanket and a Ken Follett novel, and only shook his head vaguely when I asked if he wanted company.

So I took my phone and sat by the fireplace and read Jo's texts.

Call me.

Call me.

Call me.

I called her.

"Lauren, oh my God. My people are coming back."

"What?" I said, voice down. I kept thinking of the stiffness in Richard's shoulders as he stood looking into his brother's room.

"My family," Jo said, and I heard the thickness of tears in her voice, and then it sunk in, what she was telling me.

"I'm going tomorrow," she said. "My grandmothers are there. Both of them. And they're talking. Not, like, conversations with the living. They're just talking. Speaking our language."

The breath went out of me.

"I don't know if you can even understand this," Jo said, crying openly now. I clutched the phone closer, feeling the answering prickle in my own eyes. "What I missed... I can get a piece of it back."

"You're going to Wahnapiatae," I said.

"I'm going home," she said. I could hear the joy in it.

"How long?" I said.

"As long as it takes for me to learn what they have to teach me," she said. "I just... This isn't goodbye, you know – is that what you're thinking? I just wanted to share this."

"It's wonderful," I said. "It's wonderful."

I almost asked her if I could come. I thought she almost asked me. But I was so conscious of Richard in his study, on the other side of the

wall, and I didn't want him to hear. And finally my phone was running out of battery, and I had to let her go.

MRS MONTGOMERY STAYED. AFTER THE FIRST week, she got her cleaning lady in to supplant ours, and bought us a bigger espresso maker, and then she replaced the living room rug we'd chosen only a year ago.

Richard was annoyed about the rug, but when I asked him to do something, he said, "She just needs time."

I didn't think time was going to make it any easier to live in a house where your son kept reenacting his own suicide. I said so.

"Martin was always going to inherit that house," Richard said, with that twist to his mouth. "I just didn't think he'd get it before Mom passed."

BENJAMIN LIVINGSTON KEPT LEAVING THE windows open. The heating bills got ridiculous, but money wasn't a dealbreaker for us. And with Jo up north, learning from the ghosts of her grandmothers, I didn't have anything to kick me out of our new routine: morning lattes with Sandra (who finally asked me to stop calling her Mrs Montgomery); occasional clients; cocktail hour; then we'd have dinner, and I'd make risotto or quinoa while Sandra poached some salmon or something and Richard chose the wine.

I think that was why it took me so long to understand.

What finally did it was this.

It was a Saturday. I got a text from Jo, who'd driven into Sudbury; she sent me a selfie from in front of the No Frills, her bright black eyes smiling under the woolly band of a hockey toque. Snow dusted her hat and her hair. My mouth watered.

Then I read the text. It said, *Staying a while longer. Going to help my cousin at the school. Wish me luck!*

And I wanted to wish her luck, and I wanted to show her my own smiling face, only it didn't seem lucky at all to do it with Richard's mother's new curtains in the background.

That was when Benjamin opened the windows behind me, all three of them, the ones facing onto the street. I saw the dim flash of his wings

across the light. He went north to south. Winter air swirled in, shockingly fresh against the scents of Holt Renfrew candles and bay rum aftershave.

I went to the southernmost window, hands on the sill. The snow was melting here, much earlier than up north. The first stubborn buds were pushing up through it already, crocuses and tulips, even though it was only February.

I took a funny selfie for Jo, leaning out upside down with my hair brushing the crocuses.

Then I went to find Richard. He was in his study, watching a hockey game on his laptop, even though the television would have looked better.

"Hiding from your mom?" I said. "Or me?"

He looked up, with his professional face on, all his charm. "Why would I hide from you?"

"Because you hide from everyone," I said.

"Okay, fair enough, I guess I do hide from my mother," he said, laughing a little, spreading his hands.

I didn't laugh with him. "I do, too. But I don't think it's how we should be."

"Well, she does make it a little difficult—"

"I'm not her," I said. "And I get lonely."

"You're cheating on me, aren't you," he said, perfectly flat.

"No," I said. "I wanted to, but I didn't."

He carefully closed the lid of his laptop, pressing down until it clicked. The buzz of the hockey game shut off.

"Why didn't you?" he said.

"Unfinished business," I said. "We married each other for a reason, only I don't think we know what it is yet."

He was doing that thing again, with his breath catching in his chest. "You're not leaving me?"

I shook my head. "Not without giving it a really good try, anyway."

Richard lurched forward and buried his face against my chest and squeezed me around the hips.

SOME OF THE GHOSTS STOPPED APPEARING, after a while. Benjamin Livingston didn't. If he was even Benjamin, I mean; if you went back far enough, a whole lot of people had died just about everywhere, and you couldn't always assume your ghosts were recent.

Anyway, our windows and doors kept opening, long after the day I made my choice. Maybe it hadn't been a message meant for me.

Maybe none of it was a message meant for anyone. Not Martin's suicide, not the pelican lady's desperate grief, not even Jo's grandmothers talking in Ojibwemowin about their family history.

But it seemed to me it was the job of the living to read messages in everything. To make meaning from accidents. To change, since we still could.

We left the Montgomery house to Martin, but we found a nice condo for Sandra near her golf course. She took her rug and her espresso maker with her, and we got our old cleaning lady back, and Sandra and I still meet for lattes once a week.

Richard wouldn't drive near the house for a while. I didn't notice right away, but on our way out of town for a long weekend, I saw him ignore the instructions from the GPS and take the long route around the neighbourhood. He saw me looking, and he let his professional face drop, and he looked sad and scared and ten years younger, so I reached over and squeezed his

hand. And when we got to the B&B, instead of checking his email, he actually went to bed with me. We didn't sleep very well because we'd gotten so used to it being chilly in our room, but it was also great to make love without being under a mountain of blankets, so there was that.

I haven't been up to Sudbury to see Jo. It feels so far. We still text each other, but the tone has changed; I think she's seeing someone. She's given up the lease on her Toronto apartment.

Jo and I, we have some unfinished business. I don't know when we'll get to it; maybe never. I said I'd give it a real try with Richard, and that means both of my feet rooted to the ground, no more leaning half out the window.

Aaniin, she texts me, though, and I text back, *Hello!*

Claire Humphrey lives in Toronto, where she works in the book business. Her stories have appeared in *Apex Magazine*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Strange Horizons*, *Crossed Genres*, *PodCastle*, *Fantasy Magazine* and several anthologies. She is also the reviews editor at *Ideomancer*. She can be found online at www.clairehumphrey.ca.

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BONNIE JO STUFFLEBEAM

Sleepers

The newscasters say that the sleepers came without warning, that one day they weren't here and the next, they were. I don't believe them. There must have been signs we were too wrapped up in our busy lives to see.

The first time I see a sleeper I'm smoking outside the hospital. It's four in the morning. I've stepped out for a break from the beep of my father's monitors. The so-called experts say the sleepers only come at night, when the rest of us are sleeping. I want to argue with the people – the journalists and the biologists and the paranormal fanatics – who say this. I want to say, what about people with night jobs? What about the strippers, the tweakers, the night owls, the insomniacs? What about me?

But I don't argue.

ART BY MARTIN HANFORD



I hardly sleep anymore. When I find myself alone in a room with the lights off, the panic begins, a tightness in my chest like a stress ball squeezed to the point of popping. I press my finger against my neck to feel my pulse. It's always too fast.

My father's heart beats too slow. He's dying. My mother died two years ago, and I hear that it's common for men to lose hope after their partners are gone. He won't wake up. Never recovered from the anesthetic used during his open heart surgery. The doctors don't know if he ever will. I, his only daughter, his only child, stay at the hospital as much as I can, leaving only to man a desk at a real estate office or, like tonight, to smoke. I need these breaks like I need water.

The sleeper is white, just as they said it would be. So few people have seen them up close, I think at first that I'm imagining it. A white blur, the slight shape of thin, bellbottom legs – thick at the bottom near its hooves and covered in matted white fur – galloping through the otherwise empty street. I half expect the billowy skin of the legs to lift and reveal a person under there, in control, like those Chinese New Year dragons. It runs in a graceful hurry right on past the bench where I sit. I stop smoking and stay still until it disappears around the corner of the street. Stunned, I slip the e-cigarette into my pocket and go back inside.

There's no one to talk to about what I saw. In my chest, I feel the familiar constriction, like persistent heartburn, and with it, this sense that I have forgotten something. The experts say the sleepers don't mean anything. That it is dangerous to try and call them omens, to assign meaning to a phenomenon they cannot yet explain. But I never asked for a sign, never wanted one before now, so I think that the universe is trying to tell me something. I think I missed the message.

MY MOTHER WAS A STRANGE AND haunting person. She had blue eyes and white hair and travelled through our childhood homes like a tourist. Places eluded her; she never grew attached to them. But she clung to people like life rafts. Without a home to bring her comfort, she needed me. She needed my father. And we needed her. We moved from place to place, all

throughout my childhood. Transients. Our shared unsettledness only brought us closer. So close that I imagined, when I moved to college, that I could feel my parents' pains, their failing knees, their twisted hips, their bones brittling, but I didn't expect it when my father called and told me that my mother had been in a terrible car wreck.

And I didn't feel my father's slow death. That I only knew of when I found him, clutching his chest, on the living room sofa. I'd come over for our Sunday lunch, a weekly tradition since I'd dropped out of school and moved back. It was his second heart attack. They rushed him to the hospital. He's been there ever since.

I wonder if the sleeper knows about my father. I wonder if, passing the hospital, it could feel the death inside. I wonder if the sleepers being here have anything to do with his coma. I wonder if I can make them give my father back.

WHEN YOU'RE A CHILD, YOU NEVER think of the day your parents will no longer be there to help you. It never crosses your mind that one day their advice will be inaccessible. I realized that this would happen when I moved away from them. That's when the panic started.

The first panic attack, I called 911. Asked for an ambulance to come get me. The sirens and bright red lights made my palms sweat, and the EMTs took my blood pressure and my heart rate and told me, yes, it was high, but they didn't think it was a heart attack. I insisted they take me anyway. The ER doctor told me about panic. I left feeling doomed, as though I had discovered something dark inside myself, something that would never leave me. A cold comfort.

When my father goes, I fear it will take me over until there's nothing left.

I WAIT FOR THE SLEEPER TO RETURN, but it doesn't. Every day outside the hospital, the streets are empty of all but cars: necessary beasts. I hate them. I hate the hospital, too, with the neon blue cross stretched across its front, with its complementary valet parking and maze of corridors I've learned like my own hallway. I hate the chair in his room where I try to stretch to sleep and fail. I hate my father and his beeping

and the raised red incision down his chest.

On the walk from the real estate office to my apartment, I pass a coffee shop. I catch snatches of conversation from the smokers outside. Sometimes I daydream of stopping, butting in, asking for a light, offering a smoke. It's been years since I had a friend. I walk on by. But today I hear them talking about the sleepers.

"I found a nest of them," says a grungy blue-haired woman in a raincoat. "We were thinking of going back there tonight. We're meeting here at midnight, if you want to come."

"I don't know," says a boy. "Those things eek me out."

I walk on, but the thought doesn't leave me. A nest.

That night, I sit at home and think about going to the hospital. I watch the white of my walls and try to see shapes in the popcorn texture. I can't. When I was a child, it used to be a game; I'd spot faces and leopards and rivers full of fish. I was imaginative then, but with age all that imagination has disappeared. Now I feel like my bones are all ash, all empty spaces, where the people I loved most have left holes.

I remember the people outside the coffee shop. The clock tells me it is an hour until they'll meet. I gather my things and make my way to join them, though I will do so in shadow, in secret.

Only one of them is there, leaning against the side of the coffee shop building: the blue-haired woman. She keeps frowning at her watch. When twenty minutes have crept by, she sighs and walks on. I follow. I feel like a creep, like a spy from one of the black-and-white espionage movies my parents used to watch when I wasn't around. I wish I could walk beside this woman, hold her hand, but the thought of approaching her makes my chest heave. This, this secret, it's the good kind of scared. The kind of scared I haven't felt in a long while.

We walk, unknowing companions, around the bank building, down an alley which makes me, for a moment, regret my decision to follow her. We slip through a hole in a fence and into an abandoned parking lot. Broken glass litters the ground, and I worry that the crunch underfoot might alert her to my presence. But we keep on until we come to a raised platform, the top of

which I cannot see. A sign out front reads: KEEP OUT. WATER WELLS STORED HERE. A set of concrete stairs leads to a fence surrounding the top of the platform. She climbs and jumps the fence, wedging her foot into the chain-link grooves. I hear her feet thump on the other side.

I wedge one foot in the chain-link and look down. If I fall, there's a full staircase between me and the concrete. I grip the fence top. I propel myself over, and when I land against the concrete platform, my bag crashes against the ground. The woman storms at me, fist balled at her chest.

"Who the hell are you?" she says.

I wrap my hand around her fist and lower it. The touch of skin startles.

"I just had to see them," I said.

She wilts when I say that, as if she understands. My eyes have adjusted to the dark, and I can make out the faint smile that crosses her face.

"Thank God," she says. "I don't want to do this alone."

They say if you touch one, you'll get what you want. They say no one has ever touched one.

The woman leads me to the nest, a jumble of feathers and ripped up pillows atop a giant bed of shredded bark and rotting leaves. The concrete around the nest is littered with cigarette butts.

There are no sleepers here.

When she starts crying, down on her knees, I don't know how to comfort her. I can't touch her again. I don't like the look of the platform anymore, and I worry about how I will get back over the fence, when the top stair is lower than the platform. I'll fall. I'll be stuck up here forever. I move away from the woman and walk through the panic to the fence and force myself, with shaking hands, to jump. I land safely on the other side. I leave the woman. I wonder what she would have asked for. But I'm too scared to go back.

I drive to the hospital where my father wheezes in his permanent sleep. I watch out the window as the sun creeps in. I see no white blurs blazing past. I do not sleep. I do not sleep.

I DRIFT OUT OF A FEVERED DREAM. IT has been one month since I've felt as though I had any sort of sleep pattern. I go outside for a smoke. I walk through the parking lot, weaving

through the cars.

White shimmers in the corner of my eye. I hold my breath, turn slowly, and there, beyond the corner of the hospital complex, I see another sleeper. This one is taller than the last, as tall as the fully grown crape myrtle outside my apartment complex. I walk toward it. I don't want it to leave. I want to know what it means.

It just stands there, caught but calm as the night. Its body heaves, as if it's difficult to inhale. It doesn't look, on the outside, wounded, but why else would it be so still, its breath so heavy? I walk closer and closer until I am right next to its leg, and still it hasn't moved. My own breath catches in my throat, and I realize I've been holding it in for as long as the sleeper has been there. I breathe in, and it smells of horse and clean laundry and the oil of my father's beard. Its face – the nose smooshed flat like a reptile's, its eyes large and buried in a catlike head too small for the monstrous body – snaps in my direction. I reach out and stroke the leg. It flinches but does not move. Its skin, despite the fur, is smooth as eggshells.

The shakes rise up in my stomach and strangle my breath so that I, like the sleeper, am gasping for air. I can't do this anymore. To wake in the morning is like walking into a slaughterhouse. I live all day with a fear shaking under my skin. I can't.

I drop my hand and run until I'm back in my father's hospital room, where the walls both soothe and stress me. His breath comes ragged from his mouth, and two nurses huddle around him, one's eyes glued to the monitor, the other adjusting his breathing tube. He sounds just like the sleeper. I stand in the door to his room, my arms wrapped around my chest, unable to move, and pray that my father does not die. But there is that ball of relief in my gut slowly unraveling, too, and for that I press my eyes shut and hope my father cannot read my thoughts, hope no one in the whole world can read my thoughts, because I also want nothing more than for him to die.

HE LIVES. AFTER SIX HOURS OF RAGGED breathing, the doctors shake me awake from a half-sleep and, smiling, whisper that my father

is okay, that he will be okay. That for now, he will go on living. If that's what you call it, I think. If that's what this is.

The sunshine hurts my eyes, which feel as though they are glued shut as I stumble through the front door of the hospital and into the morning air, cigarette vapor hot from my lips. I hop the bus, too frightened to drive with my eyes shut so tight, and ride past the stop for work. I get off the bus halfway home. I walk back to the nest.

I climb the fence – it's less daunting in daylight – and walk across broken beer bottles and cracked concrete.

The woman is sleeping in the pillows, her body covered by their white. She looks worn, as if she hasn't had a home to go to in years. I feel lucky all of a sudden, that I have two places I can go to get out of the air. I envy her for her sleep, so I shake her awake.

"You," she says.

"Me," I say.

"You left me the other day. You bailed. I thought you were cool."

"I'm not," I say. "Cool. I'm not that."

She shrugs, and a few flakes of dandruff fall onto her shoulders like snow.

"Are you homeless?" I ask. "You didn't look homeless, the other day."

"I'm not that," she says. "Homeless."

Despite myself, I feel like smiling. I turn away so she can't see. When I turn back, she's rifling through the feathers. "Damn kids, stole my fucking wallet," she says. "It was right here when I fell asleep last night."

"Sucks," I say. "Did you at least see a sleeper?"

She shakes her head, tosses a handful of feathers into the air. They fall just like the dandruff. "Nope. Nada. Can I borrow three bucks to get a cup of coffee and a brownie?"

I hand her a ten. "Buy a sandwich," I say. "Some fucking vegetables." I sound like my mother. This makes my heart sink, and I tell the woman I have to go. I go.

THE NURSES AT THE HOSPITAL REMAIN hopeful but realistic. Every day they give me one piece of good news and one piece of bad. I cling to the bad. I wish they would just tell me if he will live or die. If I will be an orphan or a

caregiver for the rest of my life. I want to know something solid about my future, but everything is ethereal as vapor, impossible to wrap my hand around.

Including the sleeper. I see it again, disappearing around the hospital, closer than it's ever been to that overwhelming building with its neon cross. I run after it, out of breath, e-cigarette dangling from my mouth. When I finally stop, the sleeper stands before me, head-on, its flat face looking back at me from eyes the color of coal.

My father's eyes, too, are dark.

"Is that you?" I ask. My voice shakes.

The sleeper doesn't stir, though they say they're supposed to be skittish. They're supposed to run from people, and aren't most animals intuitive? Can't they sense when someone isn't right, emotionally? Run, I want to say to the sleeper. Run like you're supposed to.

Instead, I say, "I love you. I'm sorry for wishing you dead. But you understand, don't you? Don't you understand?"

The sleeper lowers its head to the sidewalk and opens its huge mouth; it looks like its face is splitting in half. Inside its mouth, its teeth are sharp and white, and I should be scared, but I'm not. For the first time in years, I feel okay. I feel like I might be able to go on in the world.

The sleeper takes a bite of grass, chews it for a second, spits it out. The gob of green looks like vomit on the sidewalk. The sleeper turns, slow and tedious, and begins its night gallop away from me.

Back in the room, I sleep for three full hours.

THE WOMAN IS STILL AT THE NEST when I go back. My father's condition hasn't changed.

"Who are they, to you?" I ask, sitting down beside her. She still looks dirty, her skin oily, her hair tangled.

"What?" she says.

"I thought one was my father," I say. "But that's silly, isn't it? Sometimes I think people just need strange things to make sense." I shrug. "He had my father's eyes, though."

The woman lets out a laugh as uncomfortable as I have ever heard, a half-cry. "That's ridicu-

lous," she says. Then, softer, with a sly smile, "My grandmother had whiskers just like the one I saw here. And the wrinkles on her face were the exact same as the sleeper's." The woman picks at her nails. "And why not, anyway? Why couldn't they be the spirits of the dead?"

"Could be anything, I guess." I pull a bag of cookies out of my purse and hand them to her. I'll take her to get dinner later, I've decided, once the sun goes down. Once she feels okay leaving here. And if that's never, well, I'll bring her dinner back.

But the sun sets silent upon us, and we look up at the sky, listening for the rustle that would signal their return to the nest. I don't want to leave this place. Then we hear it, a clip clop like hooves on concrete, and we run to the side of the platform and peer out into the night. There, in the distance, we see the white blur that is the sleeper running. We see another, and another, running side-by-side. Five of them. And then, they lift their front hooves and, just as though they are still running across the grass, take to the sky. They run up and up and up until they're so far up there that they look just like a group of airplanes. Soon there are more, at least a dozen of these sleepers running on an invisible path of air. I can't breathe they're so beautiful. And then they look not like airplanes, but like stars, hundreds of new stars, disappearing. It's cold. I put my arm around the woman, to keep her warm. She nuzzles close to me. I wonder if they'll ever come back.

"IT'S OKAY," I TELL MY FATHER. I HOLD his hand. His skin does not feel like eggshells but dry and cold and thin. Up close, he smells nothing like the sleeper. "If you're waiting, if you're sticking around for me, it's okay. I'm okay now. You can go." I kiss his forehead, and it feels like kissing the dead. "Go," I say. "Please, go."

His monitor beeps like a breaking clock.

Bonnie Jo Stufflebeam lives in Texas with her partner and two literarily-named cats: Gimli and Don Quixote. Her fiction and poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in magazines such as *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Goblin Fruit*. You can visit her online at bonniejostufflebeam.com. Her story 'The Damaged' appeared in *Interzone* #250.

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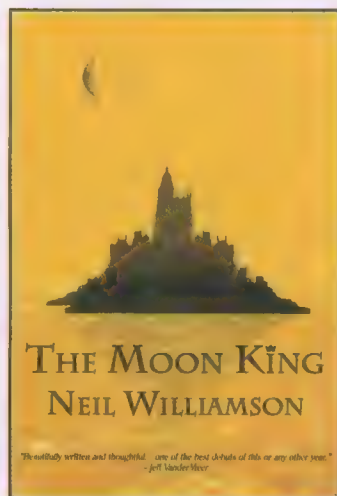
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THE MOON KING Neil Williamson

NewCon Press hb, 352pp (with bonus material), £24.99 / pb, 340pp, £12.99

Neil Williamson's debut novel, *The Moon King*, has all the complexity, power and emotional charge that admirers of his short fiction have come to expect from his work. Meticulously crafted, compelling and moving, it is a tale of long established tradition in conflict with social unrest, an authoritarian system at odds with individual aspiration and technology colliding with the all but irresistible forces of nature.

From the outset the book triggers a series of associations with a number of classic works of SF and fantasy. There's the same relish for rich and idiosyncratic character, labyrinthine ritual and unsettling architecture that you find in Peake's *Gormenghast* books. Then there's an oneiric exploration of the post-industrial metropolis with vague echoes of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, and the same sense of precision-engineered illusion you get in Patrick McGooahan's *The Prisoner*. Like all of these illustrious points of reference, *The Moon King* has a deliciously masochistic feeling of claustrophobia. And, like all of

them, it is imbued with a subtle but robust strand of political engagement. It's an imaginative tour de force. It's a captivating page-turner of a mystery story. But it's also a tale that questions the way we understand ourselves, our social interactions and our relationship with the natural world.

Glassholm is an island city whose culture is mired in ancient and rigidly observed tradition. It's a hard place, subject to the powerful influence of the moon, and its survival appears to be critically dependent on the rasping operation of ancient but intricate machinery and the carefully choreographed, and sedulously recorded, actions of the Lunane, or Moon King. The city's benevolent monarch.

The story unfolds through a series of dark discoveries, spectacular confrontations, unreliable memories, confusing episodes, nightmares and fleeting glimpses. It soon becomes apparent there is a dark and disturbing reality beneath the ritual and apparent order. There are strange and elusive creatures, unravelling illusions, mysterious machines, labyrinthine conspiracies, acts of staggering brutality and political cans of worms. This is a carefully imagined and brilliantly rendered vision of a world in crisis.

Against an adamant socio-political backdrop, we track the stories of three deftly drawn and disparate characters: there's Anton Dunn, a dissident engineer who has stumbled into the Court of the Moon King seeking a lost lover; Lottie Blake, an artist alienated from her fanatically religious family; and John Mortock, a cop forced into early retirement.

Anton, jilted on his wedding day, embarks on a spectacular bender and wakes the following morning with an apocalyptic

SHOOGLING THINGS ABOUT

Andy Hedgecock interviews Neil Williamson and reviews his debut novel

hangover. It happens to the best of us, I suppose. But few of us wake up in a spectacular, circular bed in the personal chamber of the reigning monarch. Even more disorienting, the court's servants appear convinced Anton is really the Lunane, and seem determined to persuade him that 'Anton Dunn' is merely an imagined identity.

Lottie's casual sexual encounter with an overseas visitor during the period of 'Full', when inhibition and restraint are abandoned, leads to an unsettling relationship. The artist's life is complicated by her connection to dissident groups in Glassholm and her sense that all is not well below the carefully presented surfaces of her society. Meanwhile, Mortlock investigates a series of vicious murders and struggles to come to terms with the guilt-infused undercurrents of his life as a cop. These stories ferment into a strange brew of deceptive plots, dark secrets and profound and unsettling revelation.

There are 'luck monkeys' running amok, archives of manuscripts put to the torch, wandering moons, impossibly contrived and intricate contraptions, bizarre sects and forgotten but rediscovered people. The political irony is handled with impressive subtlety and engagement and the richly imagined set pieces are sustained through a driving narrative that competes with Glassholm's strange machines in terms of its intricacy and flamboyant energy.

The Moon King embeds biting sociocultural observation in a narrative that fizzles with inventive energy, provocative wit and consummate artistry. Often dazzling but always imaginative, intensely

serious yet enormously entertaining, it is a sparkling debut novel that breaks fresh ground for Neil Williamson and adds to his growing reputation as an accomplished storyteller in the short form.

A common frustration with many satirical and dystopian fantasies is their tendency to wallow in a cynical, life-negating view of humankind. This is not an indulgence Williamson allows himself. If he casts a jaundiced eye over our corruption, cruelty, folly and conservatism, he also celebrates humanity's resilience, passion and talent for reinvention.

***The Moon King* is challenging and intricate. Were there three separate but intersecting narratives at the outset or did the complexity emerge as the story unfolded for you?**

Confession time. *The Moon King* is my first novel and I had no idea what I was doing. As a short story writer who had rarely got past ten thousand words, the idea of filling a novel's worth of pages with story seemed daunting, so my reasoning was that it'd be easier if I wrote three people's stories instead of just one. In retrospect, it wasn't easier. But it was the right thing



for the book. Once I'd started down that road, the challenge was to make those stories work together to tell the larger story. There was a lot of shoogling things about over the years to get it right, including retelling one of the characters stories almost from scratch. I hope that work has paid off and it all fits together.

There's a powerful sense of place in *The Moon King*, with the themes deeply embedded in the geography and built environment. How important has living in Glasgow been to the development of this book?

Absolutely fundamental. Glasgow is a place of colossal mood swings. Its location on the west coast of Scotland means the weather changes constantly. It's capable of being filled with light one minute, then dark and dreary with rain the next. The traditional Victorian building material was sandstone, which not only glows in the sun and darkens in the wet but is also incredibly durable. I wanted Glassholm – the name is hardly subtle – to be a city that goes through monthly moon-phased cycles of entropy and decay followed by growth and mending, to a degree, to be doughty and durable. And Glasgow has those features in abundance.

Possibly more subtly, I wanted to get across a sense of the politics of the place. Traditionally, Glasgow is possibly the most socialist place in the UK, but still exists within a society that, to a degree, has conservatism foisted upon it. In the book, Glassholm is literally a conservative society, but the people who live there demonstrate a natural inbuilt socialism that plays against the rules of their society, and comes to the fore when those rules start to break down.

Lastly, there are flavours of the Glaswegian attitude, humour and



pattern of speech throughout the book because they're as much a part of the personality of the city as the architecture. There are a few Scots terms and phrases in there too that gave rise to interesting discussions with my editor, but nothing that will trouble the non-Scottish reader, I promise.

How do you see your role as a storyteller?

Writing is an act of communication, but I don't think I've got anything to say that the world needs to hear. It's fun to invent things that don't exist, but reality always seems to have something equally odd up its sleeve. (Have you ever grown Brussels sprouts? Who would invent a vertical stalk clustered with tiny controversial cabbages? Or naked mole-rats? Or people who dress their dogs up as bees?) And, yes, fiction is a safe space in which to imagine monstrosities, but the world continually conjures worse terrors regardless. I write primarily because I get a huge kick out of creating stuff.

To what extent has your work as a technical writer informed your writing of *The Moon King*, stylistically and thematically?

Only very tangentially. In terms of style, technical writing is all about conveying information with clarity and brevity. There's no place for linguistic fun and games, which I enjoy, so I've always maintained two entirely different approaches for technical writing and fiction

writing. Having said that, I draft long-winded and then edit back to leave as little as I can get away with so that the meaning of a passage is absolutely clear, so maybe, subconsciously, the technical writing skills are in operation there.

More tangentially still, but more pertinent to the book is that I freakin' love engineering. Specifically, engineering as a philosophy, not just technology. My university degree is in electronic engineering and my career as a technical writer grew out of that. I've always thought it a shame that the default mode for fantasy is pre-industrial and I don't buy the notion that industrial progress is synonymous with the death of magic. Machines are amazing – especially ones we don't understand. In *The Moon King*, there are fantastical elements in the world and the human solution has been to create machines that harness these. In fact, the central story is about an engineer press-ganged into fixing the machine that keeps the moon orbiting the city. Even though the machine is now so old that no one has a clue how it works. There's something very seductive to me about balancing rational thinking against the unexplainable and it's a subject I've visited several times in short stories.

What drew you to SF as a reader and writer?

In terms of novels I was never an SF reader growing up. In my teens I read a lot of horror and then dabbled with epic fantasy for a bit, but it wasn't until I joined the Glasgow SF Writers' Circle in my twenties that I really started reading SF novels. They had lots of good suggestions, and I also set myself the task of reading at least one book by each of the 'greats' of the genre. I quickly discovered that I detested Asimov and Heinlein, got on okay with Clarke and Silverberg, but loved Delaney

and Bester. That challenge is still ongoing. Every Eastercon I buy one of those thin, yellow-papered novels with the wacky covers by a writer I've heard loads about but never read.

However, before that, in terms of short fiction, I can pinpoint it exactly: *Interzone*. I picked up my first copy of *Interzone* in 1988 or thereabouts. I'm not sure where I purchased it or what made me even pick it up. I'd certainly never heard of any of the writers – S.M. Baxter, Alastair Reynolds, Gwynneth Jones, Ian McDonald, Eric Brown, Keith Brooke, Charles Stross et al weren't just new to me, many of them were only just beginning their careers. But from that initial issue I loved the richness and strangeness of the experience of reading it. Because SF was new to me, I was blown away. There were no safe stories. There were weird stories and baffling stories and challenging stories and ones that broke my heart, but nothing that was just okay. It was one of those stories, Ian MacLeod's 'Well Loved' from issue #34, which made me want to write stories of my own. I was living in a shared house in Shepperton, not far from the home of J.G. Ballard, an *Interzone* contributor at that time, as it happened, and true to my youthful engineer's way of thinking I typed the MacLeod story out on my Amstrad PC so that I could take it apart and find out how it worked. Not long after that, I moved back to Scotland and started writing.

I'm not saying this because of where this interview is taking place. I'm saying it because it's true: *Interzone* has been one of the cornerstones of developing new voices in British SF throughout the twenty five plus years I've been reading it. And it's still true. Without *Interzone*, *The Moon King* wouldn't exist, and neither would this chat.



ANNIHILATION

Jeff VanderMeer

Fourth Estate hb, 195pp, £10.00

Jo L. Walton

Eleven failed expeditions have ventured into Area X. We embed with the twelfth – a psychologist, a surveyor, a linguist, an anthropologist, and a protagonist – as they cross Area X's mysterious border, hoping to discover their precursors' fates.

Annihilation, first in a trilogy to be drip-fed throughout 2014, is part dark fantasy horror, part sci-fi adventure into verdant wilderness, and part bittersweet fabulism. The prose is lucid, gripping, and establishes a not altogether disagreeable sense of "breathless and unexplainable dread," in H.P. Lovecraft's words. Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936) and William Hope Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland* (1908) are significant precedents in their mix of trepidation, adventure, and rapture. *Annihilation* can also boast a crawler and a pit, a bit like Abraham Merritt's 'The People of the Pit' (1918).

The biologist narrates. Whereas most of the other characters are deliberately vagued, the biologist is richly and distinctively

drawn. But even her richness is based on a particular sort of inwardness and inaccessibility: she is detached, taciturn, guarded.

She's equipped with backstory, with some antiquated kit – Glass and Siri go wonky in Area X – and sometimes with antiquated style. In moments of stately, mannered, almost *translationy* storytelling, she evokes the claustrophobic atmosphere of dignified cordiality of – say – the bourgeoisie of Sárszeg on the eve of the First World War.

That archaic stuffiness is conducive to a specific sort of anxiety and repugnance. You might call it a repugnance at oneself as nothing more than a fragment of social and economic architecture. It's palpable in the way *Annihilation's* characters go nameless, pared down to their professions. But Area X turns out to be difficult to circumscribe, and this specific sort of repugnance also turns out to be insidiously pervasive. It's something far beyond a *Fight Club*-ish complaint about the suckiness of office life. Franz Kafka or – even better – Thomas Bernhard often portrayed scrupulously distinctive situations that somehow conveyed administrative anonymity nevertheless. Likewise *Annihilation* gives us, for instance, the protagonist's husband as a "man who had been a passionate recreational sailor", who "had never wanted to be a doctor, had always wanted to be in first response or working in trauma. 'A triage nurse in the field,' as he put it". Shudder.

A related shudder is the way *Annihilation's* various intellectual disciplines (psychology, anthropology, etc.) are always tacitly turning people into objects. Perhaps it's significant that the expedition's linguist flakes so early on. The psychoanalytic philosopher Jacques Lacan once claimed that anti-intellectualism was always an alibi for something deeper –

fear of language itself. In fact, the linguist never properly appears. Almost as if linguists were comforting stories told to children, because language has become so terrifyingly incomprehensible.

One example of such language is *Annihilation's* long green sentence spinning into the darkness. It is described as something out of the Old Testament, may recall the voice from the whirlwind in *The Book of Job* – the divine presence whose only justification is that He does not need to justify Himself.

The association of language and contamination feels even more relevant though. Language is both outside us and part of our make-up. Change language and you change the soul. *Annihilation* also features post-hypnotic suggestions, sparked by short phrases (or, in one of the more superb passages, by a solitary word), a sort of allegorical example of personal getting usurped by events within language.

Then there's a certain crucial festering heap, a prolix monument to failure, which recalls a long history of missions to purify language in one way or another – to finally, once and for all, get language right. Obviously these missions are also doomed. Hymnsmith Rev. Isaac Watts described how "words that once were chaste by frequent use grow obscene and uncleanly" (*Logick* Ch. IV) – his own "the Lord is come" hasn't dated well. For the Victorians, trousers became *indescrībables* and then *unmentionables*, whilst inside them legs became *limbs* and then *lower extremities*. Euphemistic and roundabout ways of talking often feel just as festeringly infective as the corruption they are supposed to contain.

Annihilation can certainly be cutting-edge too, with many kinds of uncanniness at play. The approach of *Annihilation* to facsimiles and metamorphoses is

subtly informed by Singularity-type SF of the Noughties and beyond. The scary sentence loops in space, just as Bernhard's sentences loop syntactically; but here Bernhard is perhaps filtered through the metaphysical horror writer Thomas Ligotti – the fragments of the sentence are redolent of the dreamy, hammily prophetic, and yet incrementally terrifying titles in Ligotti's *In a Foreign Town, in a Foreign Land, His Shadow Shall Rise To A Higher House* etc. (And just as Bernhard/Ligotti try to prang us out with italics, VanderMeer insists that something "has to do with the other boot print").

Annihilation courses unfailingly with crisp cinematic cues too. The recurring motif of green light is very UFO. Dolphins flash in the river. The biologist bursts a trapdoor with a gun in one hand and a flashlight in the other. I got left feeling, "Whatever you think of the story, it was beautifully shot."

Annihilation feels self-contained, despite a whole rich tapestry of loose ends. And despite a multitude of influences – I've picked a few that make sense to me, but the connections and associations keep bubbling up – it is remarkably even, integrated and focused. Perhaps that's because VanderMeer isn't really being influenced by his uncanny inheritance so much as manipulating it. There is a ghostly attaché to the expedition's experts: the anthropologist. The anthropologist has pored over more uncanny screeds than you've eaten hot TL;DRs. Jeff VanderMeer – this is what they say – always knows where to score some weird. It's to his credit that this suggestive little novel doesn't just put its suggestiveness in service of a creepfest, but also discovers thematic direction.

By the way, plenty of explorers of Area X have already come back

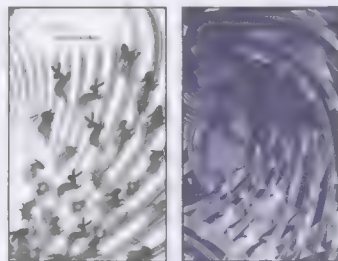
and everything. Wha-a-a-a-t? Why are you looking at me like that? When did I claim otherwise?

This is another of *Annihilation's* characteristic moves – a subtly disfigured cliché, which nourishes you with its ancient resonances, yet somehow still wrong-foots you. That particular trope is folded into a second, of the gibbering expeditionary who has seen That Horror Whereof One Cannot Speak. Once more, it's not quite the cliché you expected: the protagonist's husband came back from Area X, but he didn't foetus up and cackle. He just stared, a bit nonplussed, at a boat.

To be fair, he didn't last long.

What purposes and possibilities are unlocked by the archaic thread in *Annihilation*? Is the (New?) New Weird stuck in the past, or can it come back from the early part of the Twentieth Century with something necessary to our present moment?

So one of *Annihilation's* big themes, and one of its big mysteries, is what counts as coming back? The survivors of the mass conscriptions of the First World War – those survivors who were not just psychologically damaged, in some way intelligible under the existing social order, but carried spores of an entirely new social order – did they 'come back'? It's a trilogy, so there may be more answers ahead. There will definitely be more mysteries.



The Southern Reach Trilogy continues with *Authority* (Fourth Estate hb, 8 May) and *Acceptance* (Fourth Estate hb, 11 September)



THE BURNING DARK

Adam Christopher

Titan Books pb, 372pp, £7.99

Paul F. Cockburn

It's the future, obviously. We're sufficiently ahead of the 21st century for humans to have discovered faster-than-light interstellar travel, and started fighting with sentient alien machines, referred to as "Spiders" (for regrettably all-too-obvious reasons). These Spiders are so big, by the way, that one of their Mother Ships can literally tear a planet apart with its "legs", and it's in such a situation we're introduced to the novel's main protagonist Captain Abraham Idaho Cleveland – or Ida, to his few friends. By some rather unorthodox methods, he manages to destroy a Mother Spider as it attempts to destroy the planet Tau Retore, which leaves him with an injured knee, a medal and early retirement, with a final posting to a semi-deserted research space station, Coast City, which is in the process of being decommissioned and dismantled.

Here we're introduced to the novel's other significant point-of-view character Psi-Sergeant Serra, who is among the small number

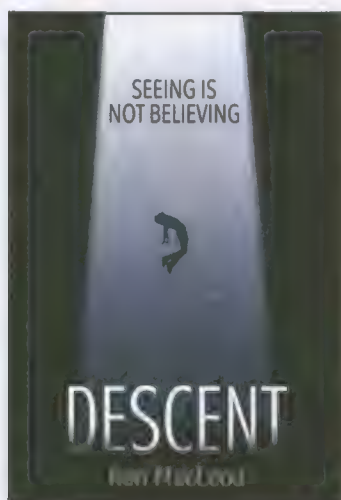
of marines left as a skeleton crew on Coast City largely kicking their heels until the final transport ship arrives to take them somewhere more exciting. But she's hearing voices, sensing a presence that disturbs her, and increasingly concerned about the mental well-being of her lover, former Black Ops marine Carter. To add to their isolation, the rare star which the station was originally set up to observe and investigate (the light from which turns black space purple, for example, and fries technology and human brains sooner or later) is also interfering with Fleet communications. In short: they're isolated in the back end of beyond, doing nothing of much value, and no one likes it.

In a standard military science fiction novel you might expect the Spiders to turn up in force, but Christopher has other ideas: here, he uses that sub-genre's familiar furniture to present a psychological horror story. At the heart of this is Ida, who begins to sense a conspiracy in the Fleet, not least when he learns that his actions at Tau Retore have not officially been recorded, and his fellow officers from the sortie have been scattered to equally far-distant and obscure postings – almost as if something is being covered up. But with communications out, he can do nothing, so, to take his mind of his woes, Ida builds an old fashioned radio – radio having long been overtaken by lightspeed communications. This proves to be significant: he picks up a radio message from a seemingly long-dead woman that's somehow echoed, via the forbidden frequencies of subspace, to a space station millions of light years away from Earth, a trigger for events that will put Ida, Serra and the rest of the humans on the half-dismantled station in all-too-real danger.

There's a lot which is wonderfully solid and familiar about Adam Christopher's military space opera cum ghost story. In terms of structure, the novel is as solidly written as the modules which his space marines use to build their spaceships and stations. It is, on occasions, genuinely claustrophobic. There are some truly memorable images. And, of course, the novel offers readers several characters of real depth and emotional complexity – Ida, in particular, is someone you come to care about, even if on occasions you also want to punch him in the face for being so self-absorbed. (And you even, eventually, feel sorry for the one guy who does.)

Yet, despite starting with a warp-filled space battle, *The Burning Dark* is also something of a slow-burner: sometimes it's only a growing sense of 'something being wrong' that pulls you through what appear to be otherwise innocuous, plot-setting scenes. Which is problematic, as it means you can get distracted, not least by those moments when a brief point-of-view character is given information well before the reader in an all-too-obvious – and frustrating – authorial attempt to generate mystery and suspense. Also, can any science fiction writer nowadays seriously expect to get away with creating a human future without in some way recognising the personal and societal consequences of social media, even in what is obviously a very military-focused book like this?

Thankfully the novel's momentum builds somewhat in the last quarter, towards a climax that's clearly intended to draw you in for the next novel in the series, and for many readers it will certainly do so. For me though, despite being genuinely creepy, it lacked that knockout punch I was hoping for.



DESCENT

Ken MacLeod

Orbit hb, 416pp, £19.99

Paul Kincaid

Ken MacLeod is a son of the manse, or at least he is the son of a minister in the Free Presbyterian Kirk. He is also a graduate of the innumerable turf wars that have interminably affected the different sects of the political left. He is, therefore, thoroughly familiar with belief in all of its aspects. And *Descent* is, above all, a novel about belief.

Oh it pretends to be a novel about UFOs (more convincingly in some places than in others), but the whole paraphernalia surrounding unidentified flying objects, from lights in the sky to alien Greys to abductions and sexual probes and Men In Black, is just one more iteration of our need to believe. It matters not one jot whether any of these belief systems might be true; in fact, if any of them could be shown to be true or false they would cease to be a matter of belief. The shadows of belief, however, have an incredibly powerful effect on the way we live our lives, and this is a novel that explores just such an effect.

It is not, it has to be said, one of the best novels MacLeod has written.

It opens with a fairly conventional account of a UFO experience. The conventionality is, of course, part of the point, yet it still feels that this could have been written with rather more engagement and originality than is on display here. It is only in the last third of the novel, when technological and political complexity are added to the mix, that the book really starts to command our attention. It is worth the wait, though, for in the end we encounter the rich mix of ideology and characterisation that are hallmarks of MacLeod's work at its best.

We begin in the near future, immediately after some sort of political or economic revolution that has saved the world, though the imprecision of all of MacLeod's references to this event add to a sense of woolliness throughout the book.

Ryan and his best friend Colum are nearing the end of their school careers in Greenock (is it just because the book is dedicated to Iain Banks that we see echoes of MacLeod and Banks in this relationship?), when a ball of light falls upon them from the sky. They come to some time later, dazed but otherwise unharmed, but Ryan, our narrator who seems very suggestible, is convinced that they had a close encounter with a UFO. This impression is confirmed a few days later when he has a strange visit from a creepy clergyman called James Baxter who has the classic appearance of a Man In Black.

Baxter reappears a few years later, again dressed as a clergyman, to have a long strange conversation with Ryan at his university, including giving him advice to study Divinity despite being an atheist. In fact the

numerous discussions about religion are among the liveliest and most interesting scenes in the early part of the novel. More years pass, Ryan is now a science journalist, and Baxter appears for a third time, but now he is a charismatic right-wing politician who once worked for an aerospace company. At last, the story starts to come into focus, though there is still a little way to go before the whole enterprise really starts to take off.

Part of the problem is that there is simply too much going on in the book, as if MacLeod was aware that the UFO plot was too conventional to sustain a novel and kept adding subplots to liven it up a bit.

Some of these, the relationship with Calum and his ancient family, the love affair with schoolfriend Sophie that never seems to get started, work very well; others, such as the notion that the human race is dividing into different species that cannot interbreed, seem to have wandered in from a completely different novel and don't really seem to belong here. But it is only when the UFO story is pushed into the background to make way for a tale of ambiguous technological innovation and complex political machinations that the book really takes off.

As ever, MacLeod is at his best when describing moral ambiguity. This only emerges from the rather bland ufology setting late in the novel.

But when it does, all the belief systems we have seen in the novel are inverted, distorted, questioned, so what had seemed clear becomes confusing, and is all the better for it.

In the end, *Descent* is a novel worth reading, but you can't help feeling it would have been much stronger if the ambiguities at the end of the novel had been there at the beginning.



**TESSERACTS 17:
SPECULATING CANADA FROM
COAST TO COAST**

**edited by Colleen Anderson &
Steve Vernon**

Edge pb, 271pp, \$16.95

Duncan Lunan

I feel some sympathy with the editors of *Tesseracts 17*. Twenty five years ago I was commissioned to edit a Scottish anthology. I wasn't asked to provide a map as a frontispiece, but I have had to do it for a nonfiction book more recently. This book has a map of Canada by region, with no specific place-names, not even ones mentioned on the jacket. Reading through the book, it becomes apparent that it isn't there to show the locations of the stories (one of which is set in Venice, and several not even on Earth) but instead the regional locations of the authors. Sure enough, in his afterword Steve Vernon reveals that the editors were charged with including a story from every province and territory of Canada. The huge variations in population density gave them problems: only one submission was received from Prince Edward Island, for example. Fortunately the poem from there, by J.J. Seinfeld, is a good one, with

an allusion to 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', and recalling a similar one in a novel with a supernatural subplot which seriously scared me, a long time ago.

Without having seen the guidelines for submissions, I would guess that having a minimum number of stories to include caused the preferred lengths to be short. As a result, the more populous parts of Canada are represented by several stories each and there are twenty nine stories in all. Consequently, they tend to be short – often descriptions of situations, with something either unexpected or inevitable happening at the end, with little room for plot or character development. Without exception they are well written within those limitations, and therefore the book is a quick read, but the recurring format does tend to become repetitious.

There's also a certain sameness of subject matter. One might suppose from this book that Canadian writers are heavily preoccupied by the supernatural, and have a gloomy view of it. The cheeriest thing about the book is the smiling ringmaster on the cover. As Colleen Anderson says in her introduction, the protagonists have a wide range of ages and occupations, and they have to face "Wendigo, werewolves, vampires and a host of reanimated dead, though not all of them zombies", and that's not to mention Rhea Rose's carnivorous bedroom wall or Lisa Poh's living graffiti. What all of those have in common is that they have it in for the living. So too the aliens of Dwaine Campbell's 'Hermione and Me', but they come as a welcome exception, with a humorous storyline and an upbeat ending. Mark Leslie's 'Hereinafter Referred to as the Ghost' allows its protagonist to stop scaring people and play a more positive role in retirement; but in Lisa Smedman's

'2020 Vision', even the Church of Spock has turned murderous. I felt that the line that summed up the whole book was in the bio of Catherine Austen at the end of 'Team Leader 2040': "She is proud to be a Canadian and she hopes our future will not be as grim as the one she imagines."

(The Wendigo is a nasty piece of work from Algonquin mythology, featured in 'Blizzard Warning' by Jason Barrett. When it changes shape this one seems to be part polar bear and part squid, which I found somewhat confusing.)

Like humour, SF is in short supply. 'The Path of Souls' by Edward Willett involves interstellar travel, but as the title implies its topic is life after death. William Meikle's 'In the Bubble' is couched as an SF detective story, but its case of possession could just as well be the result of an incantation or a potion. 'M.E.L.' by Dianne Homan looked to be a space habitat story, and at first I thought it might rank with Bob Shaw's 'Small World' (the best habitat story I've read), but it turns out to be allegorical, set on an actual planet which the settlers have sheathed in plastic. From *The Word for World is Forest* to *Avatar* to this, the message is always the same. 'Why Pete?' by Timothy Reynolds is another of the many stories that used to appear in *New Writings in SF*, where the pilot of a starship awakes from suspended animation to learn that there's a problem. But Ben Godby's 'Star Severer' presents a more imaginative challenge for an executioner of solar systems who develops a conscience.

At the end of it, Anderson and Vernon have done very well with the difficult job they've been assigned. But I wouldn't recommend reading these stories in big bites, as I did: for this collection, as my father would say, "One at a time is good fishing".



THE THREE

Sarah Lotz

Hodder & Stoughton hb, 470pp, £14.99

Simon Marshall-Jones

Judging by the rather lush ARC received for review (spot varnished cover, edges of text pages finished in black) Hodder appear to be investing a great deal in promoting this novel. As well they should – without doubt it's one of the best reads from a 'debut' author this reviewer has read for a good while. (Lotz is no newcomer, however – she writes under various names for different guises, but this is her first solo book.) What's more, despite its apparent simplicity this is a highly plotted and deeply complex novel, written from a genuinely human perspective with an assured facility that's quite enviable, and graced with some very sharply realised characterisation.

On a day which comes to be called "Black Thursday" (January 12th 2012) four passenger planes crash on four different continents. That in itself is remarkable, but the weirdness quotient is increased when there are four survivors: one adult (who dies very soon after) and three children. Furthermore, the adult, Pamela May Donald,

leaves a mysterious message on her Pastor's answering machine, which itself triggers off a chain of events that will have their own devastating effects. The surviving children, known as The Three, are changed dramatically by the accidents, the effects of which send ripples throughout the world. They become a focus for the hopes, dreams and fears of the world. Here are the stories of those affected by Black Thursday, from witnesses, crash attendees, those who had close contact with The Three, and those who lost loved ones.

It's an uncategorisable work, blending as it does elements of science fiction and horror, laced with liberal doses of social commentary and observation. The narrative isn't a linear one either: Lotz employs the device of a 'book within a book', essentially a chronicle of what happened on the day itself and afterwards, by writer Elspeth Martins. Using interviews, memoirs, eye-witness accounts, transcriptions of instant messaging threads and official reports, conspiracy theories, blog and website interpretations (and exhortations), a complex web of disparate yet unconsciously connected stories weave a vast tale which carries with it consequences for the whole world.

Where Lotz excels, apart from her ability to keep all these threads relevant and pertinent, is in delineation of character. Every figure who has a part to play comes across as wholly real, from the insecure Paul Craddock (the would-be actor who looks after Jess, one of the Three), to the self-assured but somewhat cynical seen-it-all-before prostitute Cando Lola, and from Pastor Len Vorhees (one of Cando's clients), a batty US evangelical Christian fundamentalist obsessed with the apocalyptic tenor of the incident and who eventually promulgates a

theory involving the Four Horsemen of Revelation (and who also sets up the "Pamelist" sect), to the unworldly Reba Louise Neilson, a member of the Pastor's congregation and Pamela May Donald's best friend. Each is drawn in exquisite detail. Additionally, Lotz uses the microcosm of the individual to reflect the macro in the global situation, whilst simultaneously exercising a sharply honed critical eye on the very human, if very frustrating, reaction to the aftermath of the plane crashes. Here, in all its sometimes uplifting but mostly sordid glory, is the complete panoply of human existence.

There are two main focuses here: the message left by Pamela while she lay dying in a field in Japan, and the three children, Jess, Bobby and Hiro. In the struggle to find pattern and meaning, each of these elements represents something of value to disparate groups of people, composed of those who seek confirmation of their particular worldview. This is highlighted especially by the End Times believers, who see the survival of the youngsters as unnatural and therefore a sign of the impending apocalypse. Driven by omens and portents, they see connections where none exist, cherry-picking events which superficially appear to confirm certain biases. Lotz portrays these people as those who have gone well beyond the pales of rationality, are fervent yet gullible, willing to take on board anything which gives shape and substance to their beliefs no matter how bizarre and irrational.

A powerful book by any standards, made even more so by the literary device of the 'book within a book' meta-narrative, giving it a distance which makes the unfolding events even more unsettling. It deserves to do well. Lotz has a unique voice, which we need to hear more of.



LAGOON

Nnedi Okorafor

Hodder & Stoughton pb, 320pp, £7.99

Stephen Theaker

Lagos was lazily named by Portuguese explorers in 1472, we are told: *lagos* means lagoon. Five hundred and thirty-eight years later, just after 11.55 pm on 8 January 2010, a huge alien craft plummets into the same lagoon. The ship has a transformative effect on the Nigerian ocean, "now so clean that a cup of its salty-sweet goodness will heal the worst human illnesses and cause a hundred more illnesses not yet known to humankind". The swordfish we meet in the prologue triples in size, acquires retractable spines and golden armoured skin.

The aliens are more cautious on land, sending at first a single representative. It/she makes contact with three humans caught in the ten-foot wave thrown up by the ship's arrival. Adaora is a marine biologist whose husband has just hit her for the first time. Anthony Dey Craze is a famous rapper from Ghana with a way of working magic with a beat. Agu is a soldier, still bleeding after a failed attempt to stop squadmates assaulting a woman. Each felt

drawn to the beach.

Adaora asks their new friend to call herself Ayodele. There is "something both attractive and repellent about the woman", who they discover is a shapeshifter. She is polite and pleasant, but quite clear on the fact that her people will not be leaving: "No. We stay." The world has changed, and the question is how to adjust, how to survive, not how to put things back how they were. They take her back to Adaora's home, but barely have time to talk before word gets out.

Adaora's babysitter sends a video of the alien to her sketchy boyfriend Moziz, and he recruits friends to plan a kidnapping. One of them shows the video to the Black Nexus, a LGBT group of which he is secretly a member, and so on. Soon there is a huge and angry crowd outside the house. Meanwhile, the government, near paralysed by the absence of the president – secretly recovering from heart surgery in Saudi Arabia – does little to investigate what's happening in the bay, or to protect the city and its inhabitants. As Lagos falls prey to riots and chaos, Adaora, Anthony and Agu realise what they must do.

The characters through whose eyes we see these events are likeable but not paragons, and always interesting to spend time with, especially the alien Ayodele, who is at first unthreatened and amused by the humans she encounters. "You people have your own... little inventions," she says, upon seeing Adaora's new computer; she giggles, "a creepy dove-like sound that raised the hairs on Adaora's arms". The grating noise that accompanies her transformations, "the sound of metal balls on glass", reminds us to fear her.

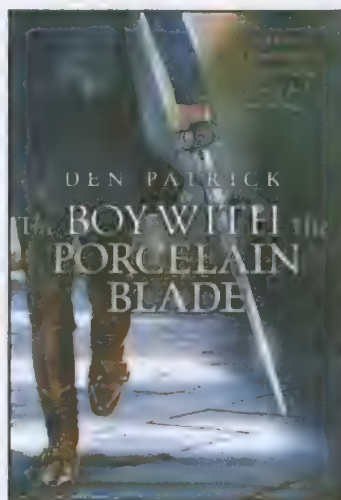
The dialogue of some characters, in particular Moziz and his gang, is presented in Pidgin English, making it a bit difficult to

understand at first. He says about the aliens: "Well, if dem get flying ship, wetin again dem get wey we no sabi?" But readers who persist will get the hang of it; even those who (like me) fail to realise there is a glossary at the back. In any case, SF readers shouldn't be put off a book by a few sentences in an unfamiliar language.

Two thirds in, the book takes an unexpected turn. It would be unfair to give away its surprises, but these sequences provide some of its most frightening images, as the alien disruption of our reality intersects with another, older disruption – and it's all being filmed on phones and uploaded to YouTube, which keeps it grounded. People in the most terrible danger are still pleased to see their hits piling up.

As the book approaches its conclusion, some readers may wonder sadly if the swordfish introduced in the prologue ever returns. Forget guns on mantelpieces, don't put giant sea monsters in the first few pages unless they'll be back to cause havoc. It does return eventually, and it does cause havoc, but don't expect this book to spend very long at sea. It's a story of the city, of the fragility of life in a city where some people live in extreme poverty and the government isn't paying attention, where one well-meaning nudge can have disastrous consequences.

Lagoon delivers a compelling narrative, characters with interesting pasts, presents and futures, and intriguing alien technology and motivations. For British readers the Nigerian setting may be a novel one, the people we meet in Lagos not those we've read about a thousand times before, their perspectives on first contact not those we're used to seeing. It's an epic story told in a measured, focused way, that coolly resists the temptation to sprawl, and I liked it a lot.



THE BOY WITH THE PORCELAIN BLADE

Den Patrick

Gollancz hb, 336pp, £16.00

Matthew S. Dent

When challenged, I usually describe myself as a lapsed fantasy fan, in much the same way as others might consider themselves lapsed Catholics. My journey into the world of genre started with the likes of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Anne McCaffrey.

A large part of what ended up putting me off fantasy was a perceived lack of imagination within the confines of the genre itself.

So you can see why Den Patrick's *The Boy with the Porcelain Blade* appealed to me.

This is a fantasy in a renaissance-ish Italian setting, rather than the medieval western European model which has become so prevalent; it claims to offer something different. Which is a good starting point for a novel of any genre.

The shame of it, from this reader's perspective, is that it fails to capitalise on that.

The plot follows Lucien de Fontein. Lucien is an "orfano", which is a difficult concept to

explain without spoiling any key plot points; suffice it to say, they are physically different, and nominally under the protection of the king. Lucien dreams of acceptance, but finds himself increasingly drawn into political games as nobles manoeuvre for power around a reclusive, mad king.

It's not a bad story, and it's not too badly told. The problem, principally, is with the pacing. It starts off with a sense that there is some event of great significance about to happen. It then takes a few chapters for it to actually happen.

The world Patrick has created is complicated, detailed and intricate. It is no surprise that he has concluded that it requires some explanation for readers to find purchase on it, but at times we seem to lurch out of any cohesive or engaging story into an episode of *This is Your Life*.

If this stunts the plot development in the early sequence, it is nothing to how infuriating it becomes as the story wears on. Almost all of the action and excitement is in the present, and so for every other chapter to pull the reader out of that present to some ill-defined point in the past is quite jarring.

I suppose, really, if I'm saying that I was annoyed at being taken out of the story, then I can't say that it wasn't engaging. And it was.

Following its strikingly original setting, it avoided what presumably had been the Assassin's Creed bear trap, to cling to its very own tone and nature. When it was allowed to run free with the oddity of its own plot it seemed to excel, only to crash down again under the weight of endless confusing social etiquette, or a perplexing focus on the characters' clothing.

Perhaps surprisingly, then, the characters were a breath of

fresh air. Some of the background characters – including, actually, one of the antagonists, who maybe shouldn't have been such a background character as he was – were a little cardboard, but the lead characters were real, sympathetic and flawed.

Lucien is the archetypal stropky teenager, waking up to the realities of the privilege he has enjoyed, the injustice of the world beyond his walls, and the extent to which he has no control over even his own life. It is tenderly written, without whitewashing him into any sort of stereotype. Lucien was one of the things I found I was most sold on, and most completely believed.

One thing I feel I have to note is the standard of copyediting. It...well, it wasn't good. The odd typo is expected in a full-length novel but here I found obvious misspellings, and sentences which made no sense at all. Presumably, my copy having been an uncorrected advance review copy, this will have, on the whole, been rectified when it hits the shelves. But I did notice it, and it did annoy me.

When it comes to making a final judgement on *The Boy with the Porcelain Blade*, I'm a little torn.

It didn't grip me from cover to cover, true, but as I said there is a lingering sense of promise, the potential to be something bold and original if only it could cast off its own baggage.

This is the first book in a trilogy – which would be apparent from the endless unexplored feelings of something amiss which seem to be actively ignored by the characters – so there is still space for some of that potential to be realised. But, though it was interesting in a number of ways, it ultimately didn't wow me and I was left wishing that it could have been more.



**ASTRA: BOOK ONE OF THE
GAIA CHRONICLES**
Naomi Foyle

Jo Fletcher Books pb, 379pp, £14.99

Maureen Kincaid Speller

We tell one another stories to amuse and entertain ourselves, but we tell them also to commemorate, to educate, and, in the most extreme cases, to support an ideology. *Astra*, the novel's eponymous protagonist, lives in a community that lays great emphasis on storytelling. The founding myths of Is-land are told over and over in elaborate community ceremonies by people who are only one or two generations removed from those pioneers. It reinforces their sense of who they are and where they've come from, but the stories also seem to act as blinkers.

Is-land itself is a small state located somewhere east of present-day Europe, which was created in the wake of a global economic and environmental collapse by refugees from ecological and neo-pagan communities in what was once the UK. While the details of this collapse are necessarily sketchy – when the novel opens *Astra* is a child, and as the story is told entirely from her point of view, the reader is entirely

reliant on her childish apprehension of these stories – it is clear that the community has worked hard to protect its existence and maintain its philosophy. The communities of Is-land see themselves as working to heal the earth, in Is-land at least; their borders are sealed, to keep out those who would abuse the earth, and they refer to those beyond the Boundary as Non-landers. Is-landers live communally, grow their own food, make their own textiles, build low-impact houses, compost, recycle. Some communities have a relaxed attitude to the human body, eschew clothes and go 'skyclad'. Yet even through *Astra*'s unquestioning gaze the reader already notes oddities. Where do the raw materials come from for the Tablettes which are such a feature of every child's life? Why must the children serve a mandatory term with IMBOD, policing Is-land's boundaries? Why is so great an emphasis laid on research involving genetic manipulation? For that matter, why does IMBOD seem to take such an interest in every aspect of the children's lives?

The novel's crisis is precipitated by two events, the first of which is *Astra*'s Shelter-mother, Hokma, persuading her to evade the Security shot, the preliminary to beginning training with IMBOD. Hokma's concern is that this 'shot' suppresses children's creativity and imagination, making them more open to IMBOD training and easier to manage. The other event is the arrival of Lil, who has grown up without the benefit of community education, raised by a Non-lander father who has taught her a very different version of history. Lil, unlike *Astra*, does not see Is-land as a paradise and constantly challenges *Astra*'s vision of the place.

For the outsider it is quite clear where this story is going, but the narrative is taken at *Astra*'s pace

which means that we follow her rather too slowly through adolescence, preoccupied with such events as the Blood and Seed Ceremony, sporadically wondering why what she is told doesn't match Lil's stories, gradually realising that she has not been told the whole truth. Always, there is the background concern as to when, not whether, she will be discovered. This is fine so long as we are interested in *Astra* herself but despite her secret *Astra* is mostly an ordinary child, who takes everything pretty much at face value, and that is what the reader is given. Added to that, her world is not only familiar to her but is familiar to anyone who has read a lot of utopian or dystopian fiction. Much of what is actually going must go unremarked on by *Astra* because she simply doesn't have access to it. As adult readers we might note that the general community seems either to be kept in ignorance or to deliberately maintain such a stance but without an adult viewpoint we cannot know, not until the end of the novel, and even then there are only hints.

Too often it seems that *Astra* is a vehicle for Foyle to show us round the world she has created, and the action will only properly start in the second volume of the series.

Foyle has commented in articles that she is especially interested in the domestic in SF but while I'm sympathetic to the notion, domestic is not the same as ordinary. An author has to work very hard to make the ordinary seem compelling and I do not think that Foyle fully achieves this. Is-land's stories about itself succeed so well that its inhabitants cannot see past them; for the reader, heavily reliant on one of those characters for information, the story behind the story remains mostly inaccessible, as a result of which the novel itself can never fully come to life.



THE FIRST FIFTEEN LIVES OF HARRY AUGUST

Claire North

Orbit hb, 407pp, £14.99

Jack Deighton

There is a potential problem with the central premise of novels broadly comparable to this. It is one which also besets any work of fiction set either in virtual reality or a computer game. To wit: if a character cannot die – or can be resurrected after death – where is the jeopardy? Why ought readers invest time and energy; why should they care? Here that problem is encapsulated by the title. We know before the outset that Harry August has at least fifteen lives. Why, then, for example, should the grubby circumstances of his conception and initial upbringing matter to us? However, North – the publisher emphasises that the author is pseudonymous but has experience – neatly side-steps the issue by beginning her story at the end of Harry's eleventh life, thus making it clear that any single life journey is not of itself crucial. And the jeopardy is not to Harry alone, but to human existence. "The world is ending."

This idiosyncratic book reads at various points as if the author

could not quite decide what sort of beast it actually is, first like a literary novel, then a thriller, a historical tract, a spy story and a tale of revenge – all the while riffing on *Alternative History*. And, yes, it does veer (rather suddenly) into more straightforward Science Fiction about halfway through, then morphs back again before returning to SF for its dénouement. As befits a tale of someone with more than fifteen lives the narrative is not linear but skitters about, incorporating vignettes from Harry's existences and encounters with others of his kind. Yet it does manage to come together as a more or less coherent whole.

Harry is one of the kalachakra, an ouroboran, humans whose consciousness and memories of previous lives recycle back to birth after their death. In subsequent lives these memories begin to resurface after infancy. Before the lives accumulate this can lead to madness, later there can be advantages. Perhaps even worse for Harry, he is what the kalachakra call a mnemonic: he forgets nothing. Kalachakra are few enough at any one time but are scattered throughout history, sometimes leaving messages in stone to their successors. No explanation is given for their unusual attribute, their reincarnations just happen. Their knowledge of past lives ensures that no new one is a carbon copy of a previous existence. The Cronus Club, an organisation kalachakra have set up to succour their kind, can help remove them from the boredom of a re-lived childhood. And it turns out that the circumstances of Harry's birth do matter. Kalachakra can be excised from the world, if they are prevented from being born. Harry's obscure origins are a shield against any such calamity.

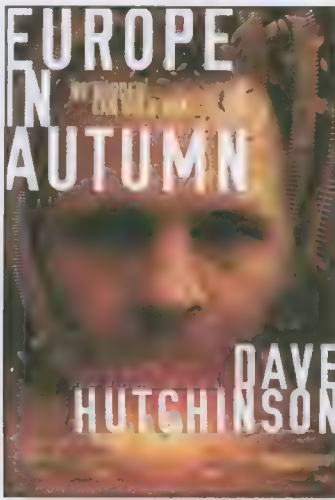
In each of his lives the broad sweep of history is similar but it is not emphasised in the text, except

where the differences are obvious, that the detail means subsequent lives cannot be lived in the original but instead take place in parallel worlds. In a stance reminiscent of *Star Trek's* Prime Directive, the Cronus Club tries to ensure that kalachakra do not interfere with the course of history. Such activity has led to cataclysm at least once before.

Harry's parallel existences have allowed him to learn many languages. His various employments take him all over the world, mainly in iterations of the 1950s, the primes of his lives, to a research establishment in the Soviet Union, the China of the Great Leap Forward, and to the USA. In one of these lives Harry is a physicist and meets the charismatic Vincent Rankis, subsequently becoming involved in Rankis's project to build a quantum mirror – a device which will bestow a God's perspective on the world.

While the writing is effective and for the most part reads smoothly, out of kilter phrases such as "a skill as much valued in the incompetence than the mastery" (about punting on the Cam) might suggest that English is not actually North's first language. There is also a lack of fine tuning in the last chapter where the readership to whom the narrative is addressed shifts from where it had lain up to then, the general (you and me) to the specific. In addition the resolution comes a little too easily and strikes against the established character of Harry's antagonist.

This book may well become an award nominee but for all its apparent ground-breaking aspirations and apocalyptic overtones *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* is in the end a rather conventional tale. But then, in all of literature, there are said to be only seven distinct plots.



EUROPE IN AUTUMN

Dave Hutchinson

Solaris pb, 294pp, £7.99

Barbara Melville

Europe in Autumn is a noir thriller shaped by a chilling alternate history. A devastating pandemic has fractured Europe into smaller and smaller regions, and as paranoia spreads, more micro-nations appear. As they increase, so do the number of borders, but that's no problem for the sinister *Les Coureurs des Bois*, a sort of espionage courier service. Rudi, an Estonian chef-turned-spy, is their latest recruit. His training begins with innocent-enough smuggling, but then he finds a fellow coureur's severed head in a locker, leading him into a web of surreal and convoluted conspiracy. This is a plot-driven story. The craft is second to none – it all holds together, and it twists in devious and fascinating ways. And yet I still hated it more than I loved it. I'd describe it with the following three Bs – it's brave, it's brilliant, and it's so boring I nearly wept.

I don't think I've ever felt so torn about a book, especially as my usual bugbears were nowhere to be seen. The writing is accessible and sophisticated all at once. The

themes are strong and compelling. The characters, Rudi in particular, are sufficiently complex, and there isn't an info dump in sight. The dialogue is note perfect – it's all believable and it all shows character. There aren't even any spy clichés, and believe me, I was looking for them. So how can such a masterpiece be as dull as dish water? Because, sadly, its greatest strengths are also its weaknesses. In order to explore this properly, I'm going to examine two sides to the plot – how it ties with the world, and its direction in general. For me, these are the elements that work and fail spectacularly.

The fractured Europe premise is intriguing, but for the first half of the book, it's pretty much all we have. There are a number of scenes that build the world well, painting a rich and horrifying picture not too unlike the present day. But action fans beware – that's predominantly *all* those scenes do. There are pages and pages where very little happens, and although this makes some sense later on, you can't know this unless you muddle through. That's not all – much of the description is hyper-realistic. People battle with their circumstances in a believable, low-key way, just getting on with their lives, and never dramatically pausing to examine the big picture. On one hand this is great, as we know there's no risk of wandering into soap opera territory. Sadly, it just isn't interesting, and I imagine a lot of readers won't wait it out.

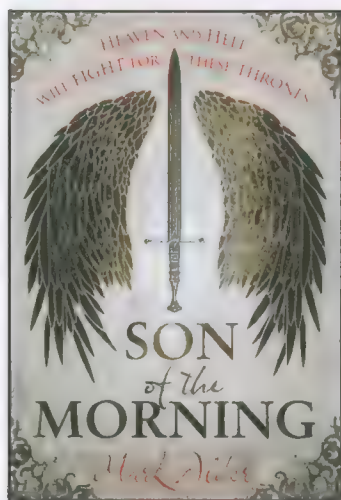
Having said *Europe in Autumn* is realistic, I now risk contradicting myself by talking about how surreal it is. Exciting reality-bend-

ing occurs later on in the book, but sadly isn't enough to balance out the earlier drudgery. The back cover either boasted or warned I was in for a Kafka-esque experience. Where there is Kafka, there are turbulent, bizarre and hard-to-follow plots. Again, this isn't all bad – the plot echoes the confusion and difficulties faced by Rudi. It's also as though the book itself is experimentally challenging the borders of storytelling – a clever touch. But again, I was already bored stiff by this point, and Kafka is a dangerous sensibility to give a reader who's sitting tapping their foot. I did enjoy the weirdness, but for the most part I thought: what are you doing? Is this book worth my time?

The answer, for me, is mostly no. However, I do applaud this story. It's rich, it's mature and it has a wonderful sense of purpose. The boredom was just too much of a deal breaker. It made for the equivalent of a beautiful statue – eloquently crafted, but lifeless. It was as though the author went out of his way to avoid hackneyed techniques – crappy exposition, pointless dialogue and a myriad of noir clichés. And he succeeds, but perhaps he went too far. Inventiveness and believability do matter, but I need to be able to escape, to let the real world disappear. I also need stories to come to life in my mind, making my neurons dance with delight, despair, or any other emotion other than frustration. By the time *Europe in Autumn* had blood in its veins, I was twiddling my thumbs to do anything other than carry on reading it. That's the last thing a book should do to you.

Every issue of *Black Static* features Peter Tennant's 'Case Notes', often over twenty pages of book reviews and author interviews.

Black Static will be delivered at the same time as your issue of *Black Static*. Take out a discounted dual subscription at ttapress.com/shop/



SON OF THE MORNING

Mark Alder

Gollancz pb, 779pp, £16.99

Lawrence Osborn

My initial reaction when it arrived was trepidation: this is a very big book by an unknown author. In my experience, fantasies that can double as doorstops often sacrifice quality on the altar of quantity. On the other hand, the book has been enthusiastically endorsed by Robert Adams who is not known for his tolerance of bad writing.

Son of the Morning is a historical fantasy set at the beginning of the Hundred Years War. Alder has set himself the challenging task of telling "an accurate historical epic" and superimposing upon it a mythology in which he reworks medieval Christian cosmology. In his take on the war, heaven and hell have entered the fray. France is defended not only by a large human army but also by several angels. Edward III is determined not to bow to Philip VI but he is reluctant to engage in direct conflict because the English angels have been notable by their absence since his father's death. However, a possible alliance with the devils could tip the balance in England's favour.

This is where Alder's reworking of Christian theology becomes particularly interesting. He makes a distinction between devils and demons. The latter are powerful spiritual beings who have been supplanted by God. This divine usurper has imprisoned his rivals in hell, and the devils are God's gaolers. With the demons safely out of the way, God has been able to exercise an iron rule over earth through the agency of his other servants, the angels.

However, the demons are fighting back. Led by Lucifer (who in this mythology is equated with Christ), they have carved out a free enclave within hell. Now they are seeking to regain a foothold on earth. For some time they have had human supporters but now their agent, Antichrist, has been born. The son of a human king and a fallen angel, he has the potential to transform this conflict into a cosmic confrontation.

The publishers would have us compare this with the works of Bernard Cornwell and George R.R. Martin. For me the obvious comparisons are Sarah Douglass's *Crucible* trilogy, which operates from the remarkably similar premise of angels and demons interfering in the Hundred Years War, and Maurice Druon's series *Les Rois Maudits*, which is a remarkable dramatisation of events in France preceding the Hundred Years War.

Alder's characterisation is very impressive. The dramatis personae are all lovingly-crafted individuals with distinctive voices. Not surprisingly, the dialogue is utterly convincing. As a result of this care, I found myself sympathising with each character in turn, even with some who might simply be presented as one-dimensional villains in a less nuanced novel. This also has the effect of turning the novel into a complex network of interweaving stories as we

follow each of the main characters in turn.

Equally compelling is the descriptive dimension of the novel. Alder brings the period to life in a way that is rarely the case with historical fantasy. If anything, his handling of the supernatural elements of the story is even more striking. I particularly liked his approach to the angels, which are portrayed as surreal, otherworldly, but recognisably humanoid beings. His devils come straight out of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*.

In summary, the quality of writing is remarkably (even suspiciously) assured for an unknown novelist. The reason for this became apparent as I was browsing the publisher's website some time after finishing the novel. It appears that Mark Alder is a new pseudonym rather than a new writer. This is, in fact, the work of M.D. Lachlan of *Wolfsangel* fame (which I reviewed enthusiastically four years ago).

I must confess I am less enthusiastic about *Son of the Morning* than I was about *Wolfsangel*, and as I worked my way through the latter half of the novel I became increasingly ambivalent: I wanted to luxuriate in the characterisation and description but I became impatient to get to the end. This problem was compounded by the sheer expansiveness of the storyline: it takes place over the best part of a decade; it is composed as already mentioned of multiple storylines woven together to tell the larger story; and the parts don't always hang together as well as they might.

I was left feeling that somehow the whole was less than the sum of the parts. Nevertheless, the whole is still a remarkably good read and a promising start to a new fantasy series. I look forward to the next volume.



FAMADIHANA ON FOMALHAUT IV

Eric Brown

PS Publishing hb, 80pp, £12/£25 signed

WE THREE KIDS

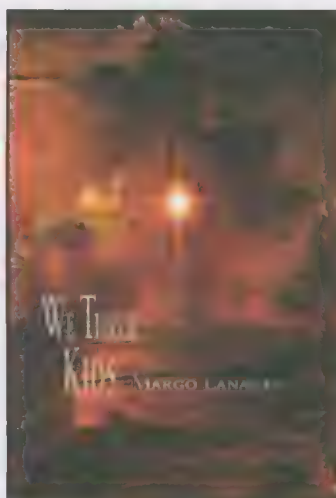
Margo Lanagan

PS Publishing hb, 41pp, £8

Peter Tennant

Eric Brown's *Famadihana on Fomalhaut IV* is the first book in the Telemass Quartet, set in a universe where humanity has colonised numerous planets and transportation between them is instantaneous. Matt Hendrick arrives on Fomalhaut IV, where humans live in harmony with a lemur like indigenous species, in pursuit of ex-wife Maatje, who has abducted their daughter. Throwing in his lot with Tiana Tandra, whose girlfriend Lalla has disappeared, Hendrick finds himself involved with an alien religion that promises to bring the dead back to life and pitted against humans who wish to use it for their own ends.

This novella reminded me very much of Martin's story 'A Song for Lya', with its alien religion that appeals to humans, but while he grounds the work conceptually, Brown's emphasis is more on adventure than philosophical



implications, with plenty of plot twists along the way to an anticipated denouement. Hendrick is an engaging character, interacting well with the irrepressible Tiana, whose devotion to Lalla doesn't exclude sex with other people. The two are feeling each other out, and we see evidence that Tiana has an agenda of her own, this angle adding a little extra frisson to the story, so that we can't really be sure which way the character will jump. There are plenty of other plot complications courtesy of the Church of the Ultimate Redemption and a corrupt police force, while the Avoel are wonderfully realised, alien beings with an identity of their own embracing a distinct social and spiritual perspective. Underlying the fast paced and eventful story is Brown's sense of wonder, with some vivid descriptions of the setting and an awareness of the rich potential in this universe of many races and planets that can be reached in a matter of seconds thanks to Telemass technology. While there is little here that seasoned readers won't have seen before, *Famadihana* is an entertaining and agreeably exotic hybrid of adventure story and science fiction tale, with each factor playing well into the other, and I look forward to seeing

where Brown will take the Telemass Quartet next.

Described as "a dance along the border between faith and fantasy", Margo Lanagan's novelette *We Three Kids* is told through the eyes of two characters, the girl Leah and carpenter Yoseph. Leah's sister Shoshana finds three "star-children" on the Bethlehem rubbish tip and brings them back to the family home, where the children start to grow at an unprecedented rate, scaring the family when they begin to transform themselves and their surroundings. Meanwhile in a nearby stable, Yoseph waits for his wife Mariam to give birth to a son for whom angels have predicted great things, and in the wake of this event strangers arrive to pay homage.

Reading like an elegant, sophisticated fusion of the Nativity story, *The Midwich Cuckoos* and the tale of 'The Elves and the Shoemaker', this is a narrative where only the reader is able to see the full picture, the link between star-children and visiting shepherds and kings, though at the end we too are as unsure as Yoseph and Leah about the resolution, with either of the two options available presenting us with fascinating possibilities. Lanagan's strength lies in her portrayal of the characters, seen particularly in the interaction between the various members of Leah's family and her depiction of the tension between Yoseph and his pregnant wife, gradually segueing into feelings of awe at what has happened in their lives. She is also superb at showing the nature of the intrusion of the star-children, stepping into the place where magic and advanced technology are indistinguishable. The end result is a compelling story, one that makes a virtue out of what it doesn't tell us, the things the reader is left to infer, and which ultimately hinge on our own beliefs.

FUTURE INTERRUPTED

by Jonathan McCalmont

7.

La Politique des Editeurs

Humans are said to be social creatures because they spend the bulk of their time in worlds that are born of social interaction. Other species live their lives manacled to things and places but humans live amongst words, principles and stories. These social worlds are so exhaustively complete that it is easy to fall into the trap of assuming that the entire universe operates on a human level: Histories are filled with great people, religions turn the universe into a machine built to produce either salvation or enlightenment, and conspiracy theories take the world's oceanic complexity and reduce it down to teacups filled with simple emotions such as fear, greed or hatred. Science fiction has a glorious track record of confronting our species' egocentrism.

Arguably the most famous example of this type of story is Tom Godwin's 'The Cold Equations' where a shuttle pilot is forced to chuck a stowaway out the airlock because the laws of physics are indifferent to human suffering. While an unsettling number of Hard SF stories are similarly questionable attempts to blame the laws of physics for behaving like a right-wing sociopath, more progressive works use a similar technique to edge us towards less harrowing political

programmes. Back in 1986, David Brin and Gregory Benford collaborated on a frankly demented novel entitled *The Heart of the Comet*. Set inside Halley's Comet, the book tells of an archetypal competent man who battles to save his fellow spacers from an alien infection before realising that the human body itself is nothing more than a succession of bacterial colonies co-existing in a symbiotic relationship. Thus, rather than seeking to defend the human against the inhuman, the book's protagonist recognises the inhuman in all of us and so focuses on a way to allow the spacers to live in harmony with their environment. Similarly bizarre is Adam Roberts's *New Model Army* in which a cybernetic mercenary company becomes so heavily networked that the company itself becomes self-aware and emerges as an entirely new form of life with its own desires and personality. Equally effective in making us refocus on a different class of entity is Bernard Beckett's overlooked novel *Genesis*, which includes an attempt to reconstruct evolutionary biology with the meme rather than the gene as the primary focus. According to this theory, humans are little more than a means for ideas to spread and reproduce themselves. Having



reached the point where the planet is struggling to sustain six billion idea-wombs, the memes most likely to survive are the ones that encourage the creation of new and more effective host mediums such as television, the Internet and artificial intelligence. However, while science fiction is full of books that compel us to blink and refocus our eyes on a universe not built on a human scale, science fiction itself is still prone to talking about itself in strictly human terms.

One of the most influential blinks in the history of Western culture came when a group of writers operating in and around the French film journal *Cahiers du cinéma* decided to begin talking about film in an entirely new way. Up until that moment, film critics had tended to talk about films in terms of their script, their cast, their genre and whether or not they were faithful to their source material. Disgusted by the 'respectful' literary adaptations that were dominating French cinema at the time, the *Cahiers* mob began to agitate on behalf of films that displayed cinema's potential as an art form in its own right. This new way of looking at film demanded a new way of writing about film, one modelled on traditional literary criticism in which directors would assume the role

of authors with the power to both find their own voice and make those voices heard in every film they made. Despite having had an enormous influence on the way that people talk about film, the so-called "politique des auteurs" (or 'policy of authors') has always been hamstrung by the fact that filmmaking is an inherently collaborative process in which the director is only a single voice in a chorus that grows along with the film's budget. Many of today's film critics shy away from that overly humanistic perspective, preferring instead to treat films as complex phenomena hewn from an assortment of social, political, cultural, economic and environmental forces. Science fiction is also a complex phenomenon and yet people seem reluctant to adopt a policy of editing.

When the shortlist for the 2013 Arthur C. Clarke Award was found to contain nothing but books by male authors, the understandable first reaction was to accuse the jury of sexism. After all, the jurors had received a number of books by women but had chosen to perpetuate the gender inequalities in the field by choosing to look past them. However, as the author Liz Williams pointed out in an article written for the *Guardian*: The jury's choices were not made in a vacuum but in a time and place where few science fiction novels by women were getting published. The market for science fiction was shrinking anyway and any woman intent upon chancing her arm in that particular market was forced to contend with the publishing industry's self-fulfilling superstition that science fiction novels by women simply will not sell. In other words, the best way to understand the state of British science fiction in 2012 was not to look at books or the people who wrote them, but at the economics of genre publishing and the insti-

tutional sexism of the publishing industry as a whole. Some problems (including diversity) require you to blink and refocus.

As with film criticism, the groundwork for science fiction criticism was done by fans that loved individual books and got excited about particular authors. This humanistic approach to genre criticism explains why histories of science fiction tend to focus upon great authors breaking new ground rather than institutional factors such as economic and demographic changes in the marketplace. An excellent example of this overly humanistic approach is in the way that the history of the New Weird has come to rest on the figure of China Miéville inspiring a new generation of writers to ignore traditional genre boundaries. What they do not talk about is the fact that while Miéville's work may or may not have inspired a new generation of writers, it definitely changed economic realities by proving that novels could sell to large audiences without fitting into a particular marketing category. The ongoing dissolution of genre boundaries owes less to individual vision and creativity than it does to economic reality: Fantasy outsells science fiction by an order of magnitude and allowing fantasy to stray into the realm of science fiction means that more books can be sold to a much larger audience. When one talks about the exhaustion and death of science fiction, what one is actually talking about are the collapse of a particular market and a means of selling books. Just as contemporary marketers are more likely to appeal to the audience's desire to be individuals than they are to their desire to appear respectable, the publishing industry finds it easier to sell escapist adventures than stories filled with scientific wisdom and philosophical curiosity.

The one great exception to the humanistic tendency of genre criticism is the work of Mike Ashley whose critical trilogy *The Time Machines*, *Transformations* and *Gateways to Forever* present the history of science fiction in terms of the rise and fall of different magazines. While these books provide a fascinating insight into the personalities of editors who built the genre, their true genius lies in looking beyond individual books and authors in order to see the history of science fiction as a succession of opening and closing markets that welcomed some authors, excluded others and prompted many to experiment with new genres and fresh techniques. Much like the spacers in *Heart of the Comet* or the mercenaries in *New Model Army*, people who choose to work in a literary tradition such as science fiction are opening themselves up to the people and institutions that surround them. These institutions may allow individual authors to sell their work and acquire reputations but they also impose limits on how those individuals think and express themselves.

One of the most insightful writers on this particular topic is the anarchist thinker James C. Scott whose books *Seeing Like a State* and *The Art of Not Being Governed* look upon institutions such as states and corporations as forces that reshape both the environment and human nature to suit their own requirements. People often speak about science fiction as a conversation but they forget that this kind of intergenerational conversation is also a form of institution with its own life and structure. By focusing solely on the voices of authors, we are overlooking the fact that these voices are shaped (for good or ill) by social forces that require their own set of tools and their own special language.

LASER FODDER TONY LEE

SPARKS

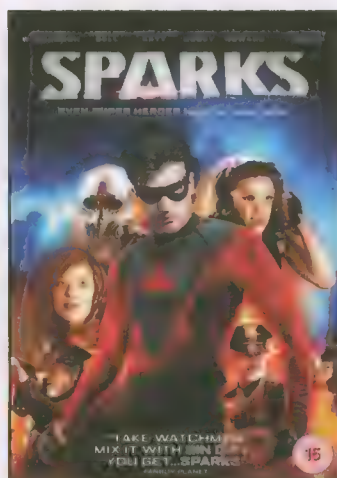
SCOPERS

THE LAST KEEPERS

ASTRONAUT

ICE SOLDIERS

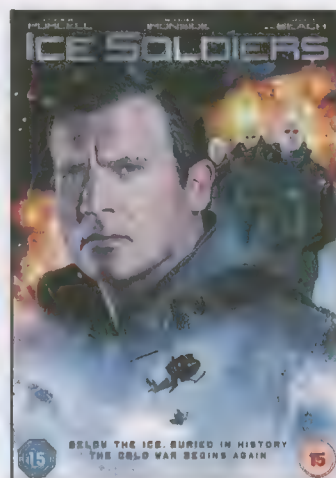
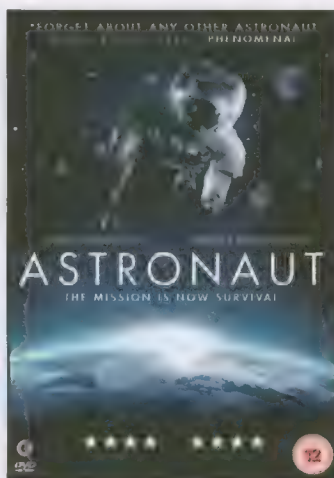
ROBOCOP



Inspired by *Watchmen* and *Kick-Ass*, super-team adventure **SPARKS** (Blu-ray/DVD, 7 April), makes the most of its modest budget and, although many opportunities for knockabout comedy are obvious, this indie actioner is played commendably straight.

Essentially it's a love story and a tale of vengeance with pulp noir style flashbacks to frame an elaborate mythology about New York mutants spawned by radiation from a 1920s meteor strike. There is nothing in its comic book content very likely to surprise or impress fans of TV's *Smallville* or the *X-Men* series, and the movie's twin tones of urban darkness and lightweight charm barely avoid being corny at times, but *Sparks* is often deliberately kitsch and makes good use of its period setting with a distinctive *Dick Tracy* vibe, sometimes offering an effective pastiche of *Sin City* themes without all the visualised sleaze.

The front-liners are Ian Sparks (Chase Williamson, *John Dies at the End*) and his street-fighting partner Lady Heavenly (Ashley Bell, *Last Exorcism*). There's also a shape-shifter girl (fond of bedroom antics) and a fire-starter heavy. The super villains are named Ringmaster Jesus and serial-killer Mantanza (William Katt), while Clancy Brown and Jake Busey guest star as the senior protagonists. *Sparks* is wholly original material – despite obvious allusions (*J.S.A.* comics) and tribute scenes (*D.O.A.*, 1950) – but, from the hero's typically tragic origin event to an inevitable training montage, it's hardly ground breaking stuff. It's just an enjoyable time waster, with somewhat limited cult-worthy appeal. But it's always good to see filmmakers trying something different, and *Sparks* deserves a share of the audience for today's superhero movies.



Writer-director Evan Oppenheimer's **SCOPERS** (aka *The Speed of Thought*), on DVD 14 April, is a psi thriller in which Nick Stahl (*Terminator 3*, *Mirrors 2*) plays Joshua Lazarus, a telepath working for the NSA. He meets mind-reader Anna (Mia Maestro, *Alias*) and falls in psychic love, while his US agency handlers fret over the potential security risks of losing their apparently compromised asset. Made like a low-budget TV movie from the late 1980s/early

1990s, this is only concerned with the first, and most juvenile, ideas that might pop into your head when you think about telepathy in movies now.

Blair Brown and Wallace Shawn fail to bring any veteran acting abilities to this flatly contrived spy romance that lacks an inspired cross-genre imagination, dramatic subtlety or visual flair. Overall, this is merely a depressingly empty offering. Without sophisticated SF content,

artistic merit, or appeal as comic book style action, *Scopers* simply cruises through its lamentably foggy dreamscapes like some mediocre spin-off of Cronenberg's extraordinary *Scanners*. And, sadly, its quite unflappably bland leads (I would not call them stars here) are never more than glossily amateurish in physical or mental realms. It is a failed bid to claim a back bench seat in the psi-division cadres of modern superhero movies.

A dramatic but clearly Disneyfied version of TV series *Charmed*, **THE LAST KEEPERS** (DVD, 21 April) is directed with a vaguely science fictional tone by Maggie Greenwald, perhaps best known for 1993's feminist western *The Ballad of Little Jo*.

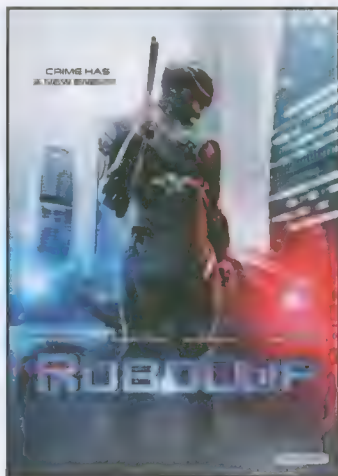
The movie concerns generations of reclusive witches in the artistically inclined Carver family. Teen-age Rhea (Zosia Mamet, daughter of writer-director David Mamet and actress Lindsay Crouse) is the proverbial strange girl – “I don’t wanna be a freak anymore” – in a small town. Rhea gets on well with her supportive dad (Aidan Quinn) but struggles against over-anxious mum (Virginia Madsen on good,

if not top, form), and turns to wise granny (Olympia Dukakis in standard matriarch mode) for advice.

As puberty and the development of her inherited gifts coincide, angst-y trainee Rhea is troubled by mysterious visions that are not resolved, either by explanatory wiki-wicca or a psychic bonding from her timely induction in the local sisterhood from Avalon.

With its backdrop of young romance and clichéd rebellion, this is a somewhat lightweight fantasy that explores a latent/student witch’s wondrous bond with nature – rather than any typical wordsmith-type spell-casting for healing powers.

Although it is watchable, unlike magical princess cartoon *Frozen* (nothing puts me off watching a movie so much as the descriptive category ‘Disney animated musical!’), for its trio of strong female roles, *The Last Keepers* is a decidedly modest effort – one that borders upon trite, and brings nothing new or fresh to the lore of similarly themed witchcraft movies. In our post-*Buffy* times, this is sadly just DVD fluff that is aimed ostensibly at family audiences that are practically nonexistent today. It is a little too whimsical and romanticised in its genre inclinations to win much favour with fans of superhero movies.



Tony also reviews a great many DVDs and Blu-rays for our sister magazine *Black Static*, some of which are either in early to enter competitions. In *Black Static* 340, and now, Tony covers about twenty new and forthcoming releases, including *Billed Woman's Corps*, *White of the Eye*, *Blood Stained French*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Phosphorus and Blood Wings*, *Tormented Toys*, *Transcendence* and the *Minister from Hell*, *Slayers*, *Boatmen Boys*, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, *Antisocial*, *The Invincible*, *Hunters*, *The Last Hunter*, *Paranormal Activity*, *The Marked Ones*, *Wrecked*, *Corpse Drive* and more, plus the opportunity to see a copy of *Abominable*, newly released on Blu-ray.

You can get *Black Static* delivered at the same time as *Inferno* by taking out a discounted dual subscription or, at some points, cheap at <http://www.inferno.com>.



Written and directed by Eric Hayden, **ASTRONAUT: THE LAST PUSH** (DVD, 28 April) is about lone spacer Michael (Khary Payton), who is faced with a three-year ordeal of endurance after his mission to visit Europa is aborted. Lance Henriksen generously supports a fledgling filmmaker by playing the billionaire who finances this privatised space launch called 'Life One'. With cheap graphics, a documentary format details the mission profile for this hugely ambitious project, while the accident that damages the interplanetary spacecraft is merely sketched by shaky-cam and blurred close-ups. Of course, isolation and boredom grind away Michael's fragile sanity, and the only relief is his commitment to a gruelling repair schedule and time-lagged video comms with a friendly face at ground control.

Apart from limited but accomplished visual effects (Hayden's pro background is digital composition) very much in the classical style of Peter Hyams' 2010, this is rather dull sci-fi, mostly confined to one completely unconvincing set, with nothing to commend it beyond that of an unimpressive solo performance that could easily have been a stage-bound, one-man show for theatre. The movie's haunted space capsule is lacking even the modest/charming mystery

of Duncan Jones' likeable-but-derivative *Moon*, and, as happens too often with micro-budget genre movies today, *Astronaut* is the kind of story that might have made a good episode of *The Outer Limits*, but it fails wretchedly when its expansive concerns are not matched by its production standards and its meagre narrative is stretched out to a leisurely 85-minute feature. It's a movie in which the spirit of traditional SF is alive, but the fleshy substance is dead and long-decayed to empty-headed and increasingly irrelevant fantasy.

Michael Polish's *The Astronaut Farmer* recaptured something of the inspiring romanticism (of *The Right Stuff*) far better than this, despite its earthbound plot. "All that's left to do is fire the engines for the braking procedure." Unless you're desperate for another space-movie fix after the excellent *Gravity*, give this a miss. Just re-watch John Carpenter's seminal *Dark Star* (it remains more intelligent fun than this!) and/or Ron Howard's *Apollo 13* (Hayden's clearest/greatest inspiration) instead. Despite the possibilities for portraying such bold explorers as space-age idols, *Astronaut's* bid for a place at the comic book champions' table is denied. This does not fit comfortably into the spacesuit-as-costume reformatting for superhero movies.

What if the Cuban missile crisis was just a diversion? **ICE SOLDIERS** (Blu-ray/DVD, 5 May) posits a Russian version of Captain America, as three super-troopers are found in arctic Canada during the 1960s. Defrosted to spread mayhem and slaughter leaving just a single survivor, a trio of GM blond sleeper agents are introduced in lively period scenes that strain to evoke the Cold War paranoia of spy-fi *Ice Station Zebra* and the original *The Thing From Another World*. Fifty years later, US corporate types led by Jane Frazer (Camille Sullivan, from unrelated TV movie *Ice Twisters*) are oil-prospecting as a cover-up for a search by the broodingly obsessive/secretive Dr Malraux (Dominic Purcell, *Blade: Trinity*) for the MIA comrades. The reliable Michael Ironside plays the colonel in charge of a military support team. The presence of a seemingly renegade Russian scientist sketches in the fragile détente between east and west, before another massacre prompts Malraux into solo pursuit of the arisen (again!) and escaped killers across snow country, where he's aided by a local trapper (Adam Beach, *Windtalkers*).

Directed by Sturla Gunnarsson (*Beowulf & Grendel*, 2005) this stylish sci-fi action-thriller maintains a chilly authenticity throughout both location shooting and studio set-ups, despite the obvious fantasy aspects (perfectly preserved über-Spetnaz corpses, thawed to play Dolph-Lundgrenite triplets in a pre-programmed commando tactical scenario). At a nearby town of oil workers, the spree killing under a polar light is punctuated by various James Bond style stunts and moments of comic book horror. The champion's story is one of overcoming his genetic destiny, of course. Overall, this is a great addition to the rapidly diversifying, witty and offbeat superhero movies.



With four or five of its principal cast all having CV credits to varied superhero movies, the comic book appeal of this **ROBOCOP** (Blu-ray/DVD, 9 June) remake is assured. It is far less satirical than Paul Verhoeven's futuristic original, as Brazilian director José Padilha evokes the earnest dramas of his acclaimed *Elite Squad* policiers for this slick SF thriller, ably reinterpreting the material with a foreigner's view of America in all of its vainglorious capitalism and congressional paranoia. "Compassion, fear, instinct, they will always interfere with the system!" Post-*Iron Man*, and a decade beyond *I, Robot* and *Matrix Reloaded*, this plays so much like a 'RoboCop Upgraded' that it's immensely satisfying as a 21st century revision, not just of *RoboCop* (1987) but also embracing spare kit parts from the 1990s sequels and its undervalued TV spin-off.

Like the astute remake of *Dredd*, this is an intelligent actioner that redefines the lore of future enforcement, with a more heavily politicised rant about US foreign policies than Verhoeven's classic managed, brooding upon aspects of our globalised present's unmanned drone strikes against some browbeaten middle-eastern targets. Although the machine never makes the mecha-evolutionary jump from

humanoid to android – as seen in various iterations of the *BSG* remake, and Indian epic *Enthiran* (2010) – Omni tech supplies a primal example of state-of-the-art cyborg cinema that keenly recalls Borg-queen embodiment, with queasily-depicted disassembling of the hero, reborn as "a product with conscience" so unlike the corporation that made him. Yes folks, RoboCop is back from the dead again! And his welcome reappearance, on duty in full tactical-black gear (like *The Dark Knight*), slots neatly and stealthily into the current cycle/mode of superhero movies.



RoboCop is released on DVD, Blu-ray and Limited Edition Steelbook on 9th June by STUDIOCANAL. We have three Blu-rays to give away. To enter simply email your name and postal address to robocop@ttopress.com, using RoboCop as the subject line, before 9th June. Winners will be notified by email.

MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN 2

CAPTAIN AMERICA:
THE WINTER SOLDIER

THE LEGEND OF HERCULES

NOAH

SNOWPIERCER

DIVERGENT

THE DOUBLE

UNDER THE SKIN

THE LAST DAYS ON MARS

THE MACHINE

ESCAPE FROM PLANET
EARTH

THE ZERO THEOREM

It's not often that we get front-stalls seats to watch universes at war, flowering and dying as they multiply and clash. But cosmogony has become the chief business of cinema since the Marvel Cinematic Universe became the standard model for creation in this age of the world, and all the other studios are inflating their properties to universe scale in an attempt to emulate, compete, and clean up. On its debut five years ago it was far from clear whether Marvel's cosmogonic model even made sense, and even now that the game has been changed, the actual structure of the Mighty Marvel Movie Multiverse is still unfolding, with a lot of the maths in MMMM-theory remaining to be filled in. The reference to Stephen Strange in their latest suggests that they already have it in mind to scale the high-level multiversal metaphysics of which the Sorcerer Supreme is a key component. But already the new model is under interesting stress with the fragmentation of the MMMM into the three hypocosmic dimensional streams of the MCU Disneyverse, the *Spider-Man* Sonyverse, and the *X-Men/Fantastic Four* Foxverse, with DC building a Snyderverse over at Warners and a nascent *Star Wars* universe taking shape back home at Disney.

For those who people these vast new dimensions of narrative space, life and death are newly plastic conditions. Of course comics have always treated death as an essentially reversible process; but in the century before this one, Marvel nevertheless held fairly solidly to the doctrine that the three deceased characters who stayed dead were Bucky Barnes, Ben Parker, and Gwen Stacy. Since those simpler times, however, Marvel's comics have



been tampering with the protocols with all three; and the canon fates of two of the trio now find themselves up for simultaneous renegotiation in rival Marvel universes on screen.

Of the three Marvel hypocosms, it's Sony's franchise larder that seems the most dangerously understocked, and can least afford to let a character go. They have the top-ranking hero, but there's only the one of him, which means at most a film every two years to Disney's six. Sony's plan seems to be to fill the biennial spaces by exploiting the *Spider-Man* villain roster, probably the strongest in the Marvel canon, which is why **THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN 2** sets up a Sinister Six sequel as its next step. How the film-a-year plan can work with Spidey himself on half-time remains a bit of a conundrum, but in the absence of other in-universe plot engines, Oscorp has been reinvented on the Stark Industries model as an all-purpose provider

THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN 2



of villainisable technologies and secret histories (including a new backstory for Richard Parker), and some famous outfits are lingered on in the Special Projects lab, so there's clearly some attempt to get ducks in line.

In key respects, though, *Amazing 2* remains a deeply conventional superhero film, with two villains teaming up (and just a walk-on for Paul Giamatti's Rhino) for reasons that never make a great deal of sense and may have been recut to fit. "Once you shut down the grid," says the Goblin to Electro, "Spider-Man will come to you, and I will make him bleed," despite the fact that he doesn't actually need Spidey's blood by that point. But then there seems to have been quite a lot of hasty replotting in post, as a surprising amount of material in the trailer has not only been dropped from the theatrical cut (including Peter's killer line about web design) but in some cases is no longer compatible with it – as

with Harry Osborn's revelation to Peter that Oscorp had him under surveillance. None of this inspires a lot of confidence that the film knows entirely what it's doing. Felicity Jones' part seems to have been cut to the point of why bother, and there's an extraordinary double montage at the midpoint where Peter first puts together an investigation wall on his dad, then carries out a series of battery experiments, only for us to learn in the next scene that all that was apparently managed in a single night. Most of the cast are better this time around (particularly Sally Field, who was a bit of a bust on the first one), and Dane de Haan's career-making cold stare gets its finest workout yet; but the writing credits, which still award a story share to James Vanderbilt, show how messy the franchise maintenance continues to be.

Ultimately, though, all this is incidental, because what the film is all about is Gwen and the film-

long will-they-won't-they tease over whether Marc Webb and his team will go ahead and do it. Long before the film opened, the signs were pointing both ways: on the one hand, Emma Stone is a key asset who plays very strongly off Andrew Garfield and they'd be nuts to let her go; on the other, Shailene Woodley was cast and shot as Mary Jane Watson before the cutting-room floor got the better of her, and no easy explanation is available for her inclusion other than setting her up as a replacement. But this is a new universe, and things could genuinely go either way or another. The film knows we know this, and that we're thinking of nothing else: it opens with Gwen's high-school valedictorian speech, packed with ominously closural lines about mortality and choice, and showed us in the trailer that she gets dropped from a height (no fewer than four times, as it turns out, in what proves an extended homage to the climax of

CAPTAIN AMERICA:
THE WINTER SOLDIER

Castle of Cagliostro). So place your bets: is the snap of the neck too potent an attractor to be resisted in this iteration of the narrative; will studio imperatives save her after all for a newly post-canonical franchise existence; or is Gwen's scholarship to Somerville perhaps setting something up that will honour the canon but keep her in play for the franchise? ("They got crime there, in England," says Peter, who has evidently been paying keen attention to *Morse*.) It's not the film's fault that the solution they opt for is a less inventive one than some fans may wish for; it's part of the costing of the new universe-based superfranchises that everyone will have their own favourite narrative dimension. Across the multiverse is a whole probability wave of Schrödinger's Gwens, each alive and dead in a state of mighty Marvel quantum superimposition until her box is opened. It truly is a whole new web.

Disney's preemptive counter-strike from the main Marvel movieverse is **CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE WINTER SOLDIER**, which weaves the Bucky thread of Ed Brubaker's 2005 run into an otherwise all-new plot which stands as the first to be built organically out of the MCU continuity itself, and which ambitiously projects a present-day crisis back to the beginnings of Captain America himself. Marvel are clapping themselves on the back over this one, and you can readily see why. They've found a present-day story that centres precisely on what Captain America means as a piece of Marvel and cultural history, while still building directly on the events of the first film, blowing up half of DC, and working in a part for Scarlett Johansson in her leathers. As the iconic survivor of Marvel's greatest generation, Steve Rogers is the thread linking

The narrative engine is a genuinely bold, radical, and game-changing twist woven from deep Marvel mythology extending back to the sixties

America's present-day geopolitical ambiguities and crisis of control to its moral zenith and reference-point when you knew who the good guys and the bad were. The narrative engine is a genuinely bold, radical, and game-changing twist woven from deep Marvel mythology extending back to the sixties (and in retcon to the Nazi-biffing days of Cap himself); Robert Redford taunts us from the top as Colonel Obvius Baddeley; and a major character with a multi-film contract goes (old-canon) Gwen Stacy on us. It's true that the Winter Soldier storyline doesn't really have much to do with the film they've actually made, and that some bits of canon (such as Emily VanCamp's Sharon



Carter) seem there more for investment purposes than actual function. But both the topline stars will be back below in much wilder films they could afford to do because Marvel has them on a comfortable earner; and if this year's *Spider-Man* is old-school chemistry, this is shiny superhero cinema for now, using a potent comic-book symbol of America's conscience to reflect our world back at us in ways that have only got more topical since shooting – almost as if that nice Mr Snowden was being run by Marvel all along. Just before the film came out we lost Lorenzo Semple Jr, architect not just of the *Batman* series and film and the 1980 *Flash Gordon*, but also of the classic seventies conspiracy thrillers *The Parallax View* and *Three Days of the Condor*, to which the Russo brothers' film pays extended homage. Sometimes it seems as if our entire universe is part of the Marvel promotional machine.

The late Charles Segal originally coined the viral term “megatext” to describe the vastly extended narrative system of Greek myth, the largest such continuity in human culture until the Silver Age flowering of the DC and Marvel universes. Now that canon's first avenger and public-domain superhero zero is himself fissured between universes in different bodies, as Renny Harlin's **THE LEGEND OF HERCULES** seeks to preempt Brett Ratner's Dwayne Johnson *Hercules* with a cheaply cast and digitalised origin tale which rewrites Amphitryon as a psychotic tyrant and the hero's journey as a lazy retread of *Gladiator* (betrayal, enslavement, ocean transport, combat sports, return in vengeance) with visual nods to *300* – though the generous show-ers of 3D particulates are wasted on UK audiences, who've had to settle for the 2D version. Kellan Lutz plays the hero like a Chris Hemsworth misshape, with an

“The often quite attractive digital backdrops are let down by crowd effects that rarely rise much above game-animation quality”

accent that Crowhursts around in mid-Atlantic circles, and the often quite attractive digital backdrops are let down by crowd effects that rarely rise much above game-animation quality. But everyone gives it what they can afford, with Alcmena doing her best to mime sex with the invisible king of the gods, and the obligatory anachronisms in military tactics and modern-Greek-named henchbuddy; and if it sets the bar low for its competitor, it still has a chips-cheap cheesiness of its own. Originally this one was going to be *Hercules: The Legend Begins* and its competitor *Hercules: The Thracian Wars*. At least this one seems to have come to recognise this is one legend that isn't going to franchise.



Darren Aronofsky's magnificently bonkers **NOAH** goes one better in its pursuit of primeval heroic spectacle to the dawn of myth itself, refloating the Genesis narrative as an IMAX disaster movie set in a fantasy Icelandozoic age of the world. Baiting the emerging audience for faith-based filmmaking with a film that refuses to use the G-word, presents climate-change deniers as the damned, and glosses the opening of Genesis with footage of the creation of the Earth-Moon system and the story of evolution, it's annoyed all the people it needed to annoy, won the hearts and change of many it was predicted not to, and defied doomsayers by turning the man who made *Pi* and *The Fountain* into the four-quadrant blockbuster filmmaker he's always threatened to be. And indeed at heart it's the comics film Aronofsky has so often dallied with making, after inconclusive flirtations at various times with *Batman: Year One*, *Watchmen*, and *The Wolverine*.

Noah surfaced first in French, as a four-volume graphic novel series appearing annually from 2011, and as with *The Fountain* (which was repurposed as a graphic novel after the Brad Pitt version fell through, only to rise again on film with a pared-down budget) the comic version fills in some of the additional crazy that didn't make the final film.

Those who've been following the French volumes have long known that this was never not going to be a feast of barmy. Aronofsky remakes *Evan Almighty* and *2012* in IMAX. Full-scale ark built to God's own blueprints. Digital animals on drugs. Exploding six-armed Jack Kirby Nephilim. Noah as a preincarnation of the obsessive, self-destructive, vision-chasing Aronofsky hero. The wtf bit from Genesis 9.20 where Noah gets off his face and shows his sons his knob. But still nothing can prepare you for the things that weren't even in the comic. Kabbalistic McGuffin stones. Angel-killing superweapons.

Methuselah spiking Noah's tea with hallucinogens. Russell Crowe sings, again. Jennifer Connelly weeps. (As well she might, so soon after their uproarious reunion in *Winter's Tale*.) Emma Watson also sings. Patti Smith sings too, a self-penned end title song with the Kronos Quartet which includes the lyric "Two white doves, two white wings to carry you away." (I keep getting four when I run that one on my fingers.) Not to mention the Biblically inspirational dialogue: "We are men, and Man United are invincible!" (Not this season they're not. Keep up.) Curiously missing from the film entirely: very expensive things like, um, letting the animals out of the ark. How did a nervous Paramount's disclaimer go again? "While artistic license has been taken, we believe that this film is true to the essence, values and integrity of a story that is a cornerstone of faith for millions of people worldwide." Believe all they want, but like things that you're liable to read in the Bible, it ain't necessarily so.



You might think that “Noah on a train” was the winner of a joke-pitch competition, just beating out *Another 47 Ronin* and the zombie remake of *Bridesmaids*. But Bong Joon-Ho’s **SNOWPIERCER** is pretty much that, albeit with Ed Harris’s Noah figure now the antagonist and Chris Evans stepping into Ray Winstone’s shoes as the leader of the uprising against him. Like *Noah*, it’s come to us out of the French graphics scene, as a free update of the thirty-year-old first volume of Jean-Marc Rochette’s *Transperceneige* series about a thousand-car train hurtling endlessly around an Earth frozen by climate apocalypse. Realising that the scenario would never stand up to rational scrutiny, Bong’s version heightens the surreality and allegory with outré performances and designs, as Evans and his dwindling band of rebels battle their way up the class system from the back-of-train ghetto through the increasingly opulent carriages that house their

privileged oppressors.

Bong’s original cut came out in Korea and France last year, but elsewhere has been held at a red signal by one of Harvey Weinstein’s cutting-room standoffs, allowing everyone to stock up on the French DVD instead, ahead of what is now a limited US release for the director’s version in June. You can see Weinstein’s point, because *Snowpiercer* is a wilfully strange film, with the satirical wit of Bong’s best-known film *The Host* on display in a much darker form that won’t be for everyone. The tone is uneven, perhaps deliberately so; among all the crazy performances from the up-train characters, Evans’ climactic monologue (the one about what happened to John Hurt’s arm) is an audition piece for the theatre of the undeliverable. But just as *Noah* survived Paramount’s editing wars to launch triumphantly in the director’s version, *Snowpiercer* is unimprovably what it wants to be and proud of it.

DIVERGENT bundles some of the same dystopian themes in a friendlier franchise package, as Shailene Woodley navigates her way to adulthood in a post-apocalyptic Chicago which has been social-engineered into a competitive hierarchy of personality-typed “factions” and an underclass of factionless oppressed. Over the course of three novels and now four films, she’ll find romance, heroism, and the truth about her society and what’s beyond the city wall that shuts out the wider world, as well as rather a lot of tedious conspiracy plotting and bickering scenes as the air goes out of the initial setup in later books. Nevertheless, in the initial flush of relief over the success of what looked pre-release like a *Transcendence*-level bomb, Lionsgate have now done their usual *Deathly Hallows* number on the final volume, which will presumably now break in two around chapters 27–8. But they’ll have their work cut out. Not



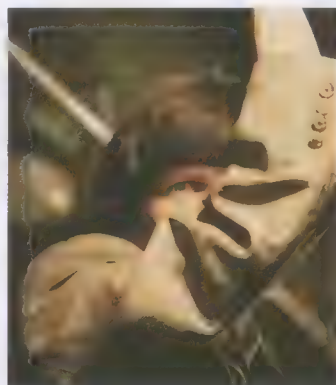
only are the later volumes a bit of a struggle after the vivid and pageturning first, but those who've read to the end will know that the split voices of the final volume and Cullenised renarration of the spin-off cycle are part of a very Hollywood-unfriendly narrative turn that Woodley's *Spider-Man* role has uncomfortably anticipated.

Envious eyes wonder how Lionsgate manage to pick the YA franchises that will soar like eagles while all their bigger rivals are buying up turkeys. Nobody else thought *Divergent* would be a hit; there's no supernatural element, and no love triangle (or at least none left in the film); the bleak dystopian post-apoc Chicago setting seemed to offer little scope for cinematic whizz; while the premise just looked dumb. An entire society built around psychometric testing? Teenagers sorting-hatted for life into society-wide high-school cliques, depending on whether they're "smart, kind, honest, selfless or brave?" Pass. But *Divergent* has defied the doubts to come out punching, and everyone wants to know Lionsgate's secret – which is that there is no secret, apart from maybe reading the book before you buy it. Anyone can tell immediately from the

"You're a threat to the whole society. You don't fit into a category. They can't control you." It helps a lot that Woodley is wonderful, living richly up to her thankless destiny as the next J-Law (and in time, no doubt, previous El-Fan; you winced at it here first). It almost makes you look forward to the sequels.

first volumes of their series that *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Divergent* are films, while *I Am Number Four*, *Beautiful Creatures*, *The Mortal Instruments* and the rest simply aren't. Like Stephenie Meyer, Veronica Roth has a sense of what it feels like to be a sixteen-year-old, and how the tropes of fantastic fiction can distil that feeling into a potent allegory of adult becoming. Heroine Tris is "Divergent" – as the later books reveal, simply a pre-apocalyptic normal teen who doesn't fit into the Procrustean adult role that society is trying to make for her – and the message to her and to all her kind is "You're a threat to the whole society. You don't fit into a category. They can't control you." It helps a lot that Woodley is wonderful, living richly up to her thankless destiny as the next J-Law (and in time, no doubt, previous El-Fan; you winced at it here first). It almost makes you look forward to the sequels.

Jesse Eisenberg is also trying to find out who he really is in Richard Ayoade's insistently bizarre reading of **THE DOUBLE**. The last film of Dostoevsky's novella was actually *Black Swan*, though the source got rather buried in the mix when Aronofsky threw in a couple of other writers to repurpose the bought-in script as a ballet pic. Now Ayoade, and his instigator Avi Korine, have restored the bureaucratic setting and put back something of the original dynamic in a determinedly crazy rendering of their own, set in a nightmarish underground workplace where mousy analyst Eisenberg finds his foundering life progressively appropriated by a confident, successful, and unscrupulous doppelgänger while everyone else seems oblivious to the weirdness. Liberally summoning the spirits of Lynch, Kaufman, and Gilliam (there are even ducts), it gives the vivid impression of having been horrible to shoot, but that's probably just the calculated claustrophobia and lightlessness of the disused basement in Woking doing its stuff. Famous faces swim into view and vanish; the plot spirals into *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* identity psychosis; and the comedy gets darker and darker until you can't remember the light or whether you were ever exactly having fun. But that's pretty much the point.



UNDER THE SKIN

Lynchian sound design is used to similarly unheimlich effect in Jonathan Glazer's **UNDER THE SKIN**, whose heavily improvised storyline riffs freely on the premise of Michel Faber's novel: a female alien cruising Scotland picking up hitch-hikers who won't be missed and consigning them to a monstrous offscreen fate whose nature is revealed in progressive glimpses. The novel stuck to the heroine's perspective but gradually irised out to reveal more of the aliens' activity, background, and purpose, while at the same time going deeper into her increasingly conflicted consciousness and mission. But where Faber's heroine was a painfully mutilated simulation of humanity with an amputated tail, forced bipedalism, gigantic false boobs, and huge thick glasses to hide her alien eyes, Glazer's, much more cinematically, is a gorgeous blue digital effect in a Scarlett Johansson skin who lures marks into derelict houses and does something dark and incomprehensible to them with her kit off. After many attempts at a more faithful and conventional

rendering, Glazer's film has ended up performing a similarly drastic surgery on the novel's narrative (and the significance of the title), amputating all the alien plot and leaving the skin of mystery intact, while retaining the resonant estrangement of viewing the mundanities of our world through incomprehending alien eyes. So we watch alien Scarlett riding the escalator in the Buchanan Centre and fielding directions to the Maryhill Tesco's; alien Scarlett eating Black Forest gâteau very slowly in a highland tearoom and boaking it up again after; alien Scarlett trying to make sense of Tommy Cooper reruns and getting quite into Deacon Blue.

One of the disappointments of Faber's novel, for all its effectiveness overall, was that when all the mystery has been stripped away the abductees turned out to be merely farmed for export to a glum dystopian world as an edible delicacy: a bathetic and rather silly reveal after all the evocative mystery. But Glazer's film is careful to withhold these cognitive comfort foods, relishing the viewer's

"We watch alien Scarlett riding the escalator to the Buchanan Centre and fielding directions to the Maryhill Tesco's"

destabilising inability to tell scripted scenes from improvised, staged action from secret filming, actors from members of the public, and (in one unforgettable sequence) special makeup from neurofibromatosis. The narrative is a bit sketchy, and Glazer has had to impose an artificial sense of direction by starting in Glasgow and moving to the scenic desolation of Lochgilphead, so that the film has the feeling of a damp Scottish holiday in the company of Tsathoggua. But Johansson, at least, is having a vintage year in posthuman performance, having already knocked one out of the park with her invisible turn in *Her* before leathering up for *Winter Soldier*, and she still has Luc Besson's *Lucy* as a kind of fusion of all three roles. Who wouldn't want to be in a vehicle with her?



Now: here's a rather sweet story. In 1975 the prolific British fictioneer Syd Bounds published an inconspicuous eleven-page short called "The Animators" in the anthology *Tales of Terror* from *Outer Space*. It was then forgotten by everyone else, but lodged sufficiently in the affection of veteran TV animator-turned-writer Clive Dawson for him to turn it into a spec which hoop-jumped its way through the platform game that is UK film production, to see the dusty red light of day as an odd little Irish co-production called **THE LAST DAYS ON MARS**. The late and ill-fitting title notwithstanding, it's set in the last nineteen hours of the first team's tour on a manned Mars base, where the original zombie virus that wiped out the Martians turns the team one-by-one into living dead who work against the survivors to ship the organism home to infect the Earth.

It's an unassuming tale that's been made more so by the combover budget, which has taken out a big space-set finale and maximised the use of Martian dust-storms to obliterate anything that might cost money. But it's animated by a visible affection for Bounds' story, which it tracks with an unsolicited fidelity that even extends to the inexplicable roster of heavily British names (though three have been rewritten as female, whose kill order can be surmised from their distribution as one ethnic, one annoying, and one blonde). Undeterred by the likenesses to John Carpenter's ill-received *Ghosts of Mars*, it was never going to beat the commercial and critical jinx on Martian films; but the casting punches above weight, with Liev Schreiber, Romola Garai, Olivia Williams and Elias Koteas among the expendables lining up to be reborned as shambling mummies, and it's refreshing to see a fondly-remembered author commemorated with a homegrown interplanetary thriller.



Pleasingly completing a trio of sf films from the Celtic fringes, Welsh venture **THE MACHINE** is a knowing addition to the canon of robot Pygmalion pictures, with Toby Stephens' conflicted neuroscientist trying to develop a technology to save his daughter within a weapons programme that has much more sinister uses for his inventions. The actual story is a bit of a Frankenplot, stitched together out of bits that don't obviously belong together. After a rather effective "Phase One" about restoring brain function to brain-injured combat veterans with the help of Caity Lotz's AI researcher, the project moves abruptly to an entirely different film which it calls "Phase Two", in which suddenly Stephens' neuroscientific expertise enables him to create a *Maschinenmensch* with Lotz's face who then becomes caught in a code war between conflicted but

THE MACHINE



decent Stephens and villainous Denis Lawson's attempt to weaponise and dehumanise her for battlefield use. But the film plays its limited budget well, going even further than *Last Days on Mars* in using low-visibility settings to mask its unbuilt backgrounds, and with a claustrophobic cheapness that has some of the atmosphere of black-and-white *Doctor Who*. The three principals are excellent, with Lawson in particular never better, while Lotz works so hard at differentiating her human and android characters (the latter with a full-body fleshtoned outfit by someone called Libidex, who turn out upon googling to provide exactly the services you'd expect) that they don't actually seem much like one another at all. The ending will probably get mixed responses, but offers a wry tease of the post-human family of the future. What they'll be watching is anyone's guess.

Canadian animation **ESCAPE FROM PLANET EARTH** offers a more orthodox family take on some of the same territory, as a pair of feuding blue-skinned brothers venture to "The Dark Planet" and fall into the clutches of a Shatner-voiced Area 51 commander who wants to harness their technology to build an omniscient planet-busting superweapon to cleanse the cosmos of non-human life. ("I'm going to wipe out the alien infestation one planet at a time!") Ostensibly a film about blood being thicker than sugar-water ("You don't have to travel hundreds of light years and defeat an intergalactic enemy to find that the greatest adventure is right here with your brother and your family"), it's deep-down one of those faintly embittered films about filmmaking, with space hero Scorch Supernova hogging all the limelight and

"A pair of feuding blue-skinned brothers venture to 'The Dark Planet' and fall into the clutches of a Shatner-voiced Area 51 commander"

credit while backstage boffin brother Gary does all the heavy lifting and damage limitation from back in mission control where nobody sees or appreciates. But it's also an optimistic and inclusive film about immigration and the phoney war on terror, with the internees busting out of alien Gitmo ("You are now a guest of the US Government") to forge their own destiny of peace between the worlds. Of course, as Gary notes of the branded Dark Planet cola, it's 800% sugar; but as his superiors are quick to remind him, "That's what makes it good for kids!"

THE ZERO THEOREM



There are at least five contenders for the barmiest film of the season, but even Aronofsky and Bong stand little chance against the return of the master himself in Terry Gilliam's full-on-batfaeces **THE ZERO THEOREM**. One of Gilliam's cherished pet projects for so many years that its arrival in reality takes some getting used to, it's first-time screenwriter Pat Rushin's adaptation of his 1999 novella 'The Call,' which wasn't actually published till a decade later, by which time Gilliam had the film version all set up with Billy Bob Thornton, only for Heath Ledger's death during *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* to send him back to the drawing-board to salvage that one instead. Now Christoph Waltz has taken over in the lead, as the "entity-crunching" mathematician-analyst

cracking slowly up as he waits for a phone-call that will validate his life while his employers pressure him in the opposite direction: to complete a proof of the Zero Theorem that will show mathematically that life is meaningless.

Though the cheapest film Gilliam has made (even cheaper than *Tideland*), its first half-hour is among the most ambitious stuff Gilliam's ever shot, crawling with physical and digital scatter gags that at one point you can see Rushin continuing to scribble down as throwaways, still writing the film even as it's filming him writing it. But with the shift to single-set chamber drama there's a downshift of pace and invention, and the cast find it hard to keep the plates spinning as the conceit wears thin and the holes in the logic widen. It's

"Though the cheapest film Gilliam has made (even cheaper than *Tideland*), its first half-hour is among the most ambitious stuff Gilliam's ever shot"

clearly the film Gilliam wanted to make, a companion piece more to *Tideland* than to *Brazil*, which it otherwise more closely echoes in themes, look, plot, and (not least) ending; and if it continues the raggedness of Gilliam's recent work, it still makes eight million look like eighty, doesn't stint on the ducts, and has the killer mission statement "You're trying to prove that the universe is all for nothing." Perhaps, as the Marvel macrocosm swallows the sun, that's a message we need to hear.

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